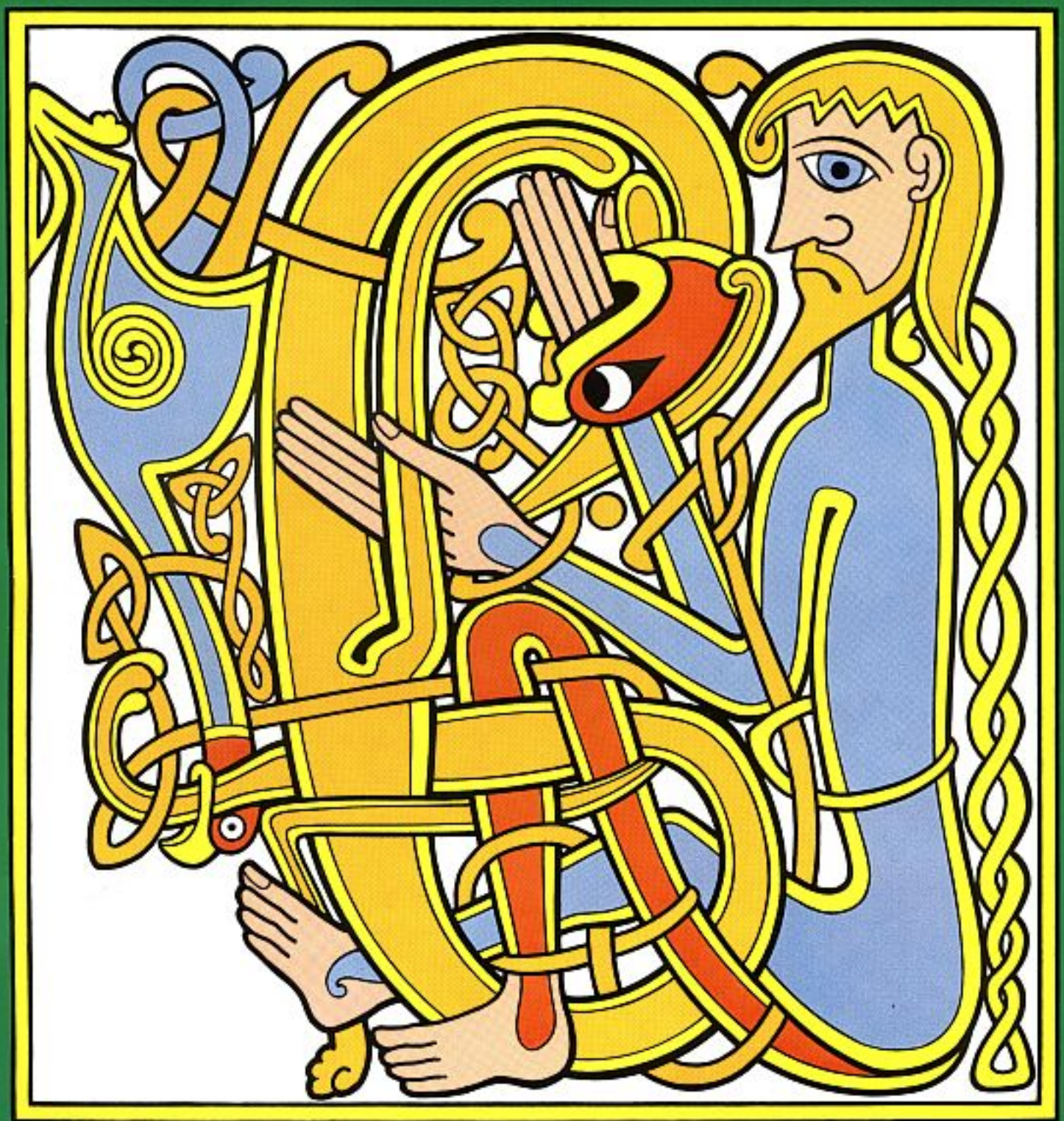
VISIT…

xLR8

a coloring book of Ancient Ireland



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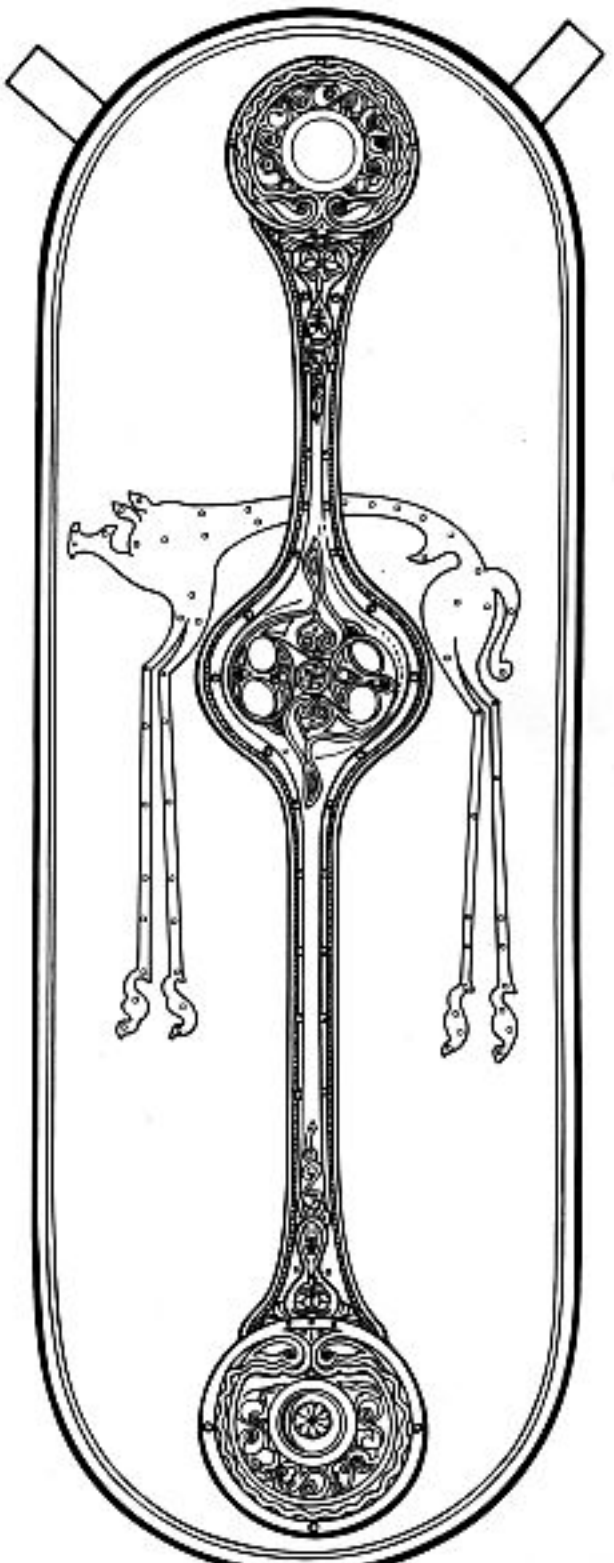

If you like Celtic art, you will surely enjoy Queen Boudicca in GREAT WOMEN PAPER DOLLS.

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Two thousand three hundred years ago warrior bands sailed in leather-covered boats from Britain to Ireland. They came originally from central Europe, and they were known as Celts. The weapons they brought with them were often decorated with patterns of spirals, like those on the sword holders you see here. The sword handle takes on the shape of a man. Perhaps the Celts believed he was a magical spirit who lived in the blade and gave it power.

Text: W. Stein; Art: N. Swanberg,
L. Anderson, N. Conkle, B. Grossman

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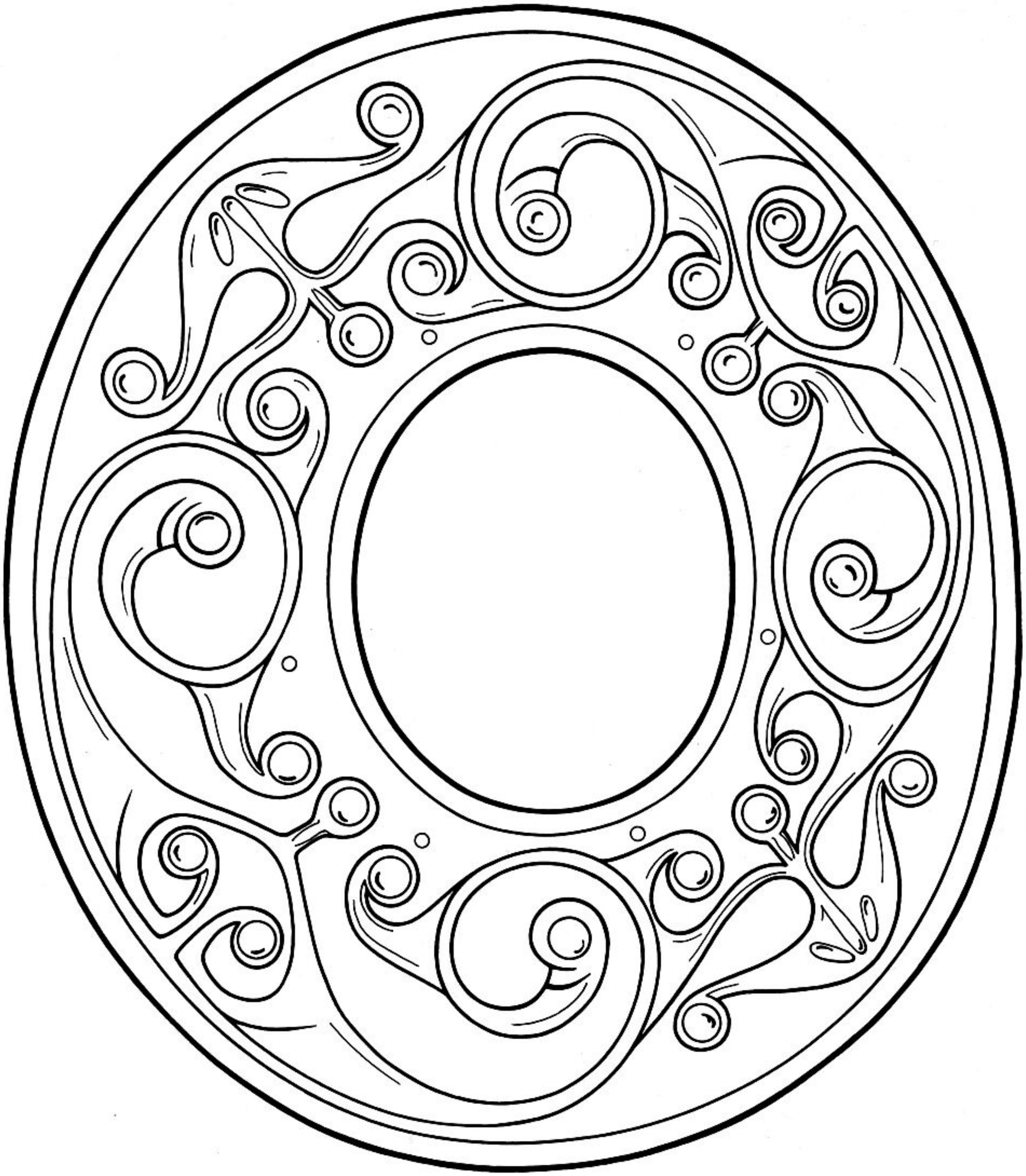

When Celtic warriors went into battle, they terrified the enemy with the thunderous noise they made, screaming as they charged, and blowing long war trumpets like this with their harsh blaring sound. Yet Celtic warriors were also noble princes, and so their military trumpets were ugly to hear but beautiful to see, with fine spiral ornament around one end.

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Trinity College, Dublin

This is the shape of the horn, opposite.

From the Gundestrup cauldron, Copenhagen

The warlike Celts respected the heroic bravery of the wild boar. This fierce animal was a god in their pagan religion. One Celtic chieftain placed this little bronze figure of a boar on top of his helmet, to protect him and inspire him to equal courage.

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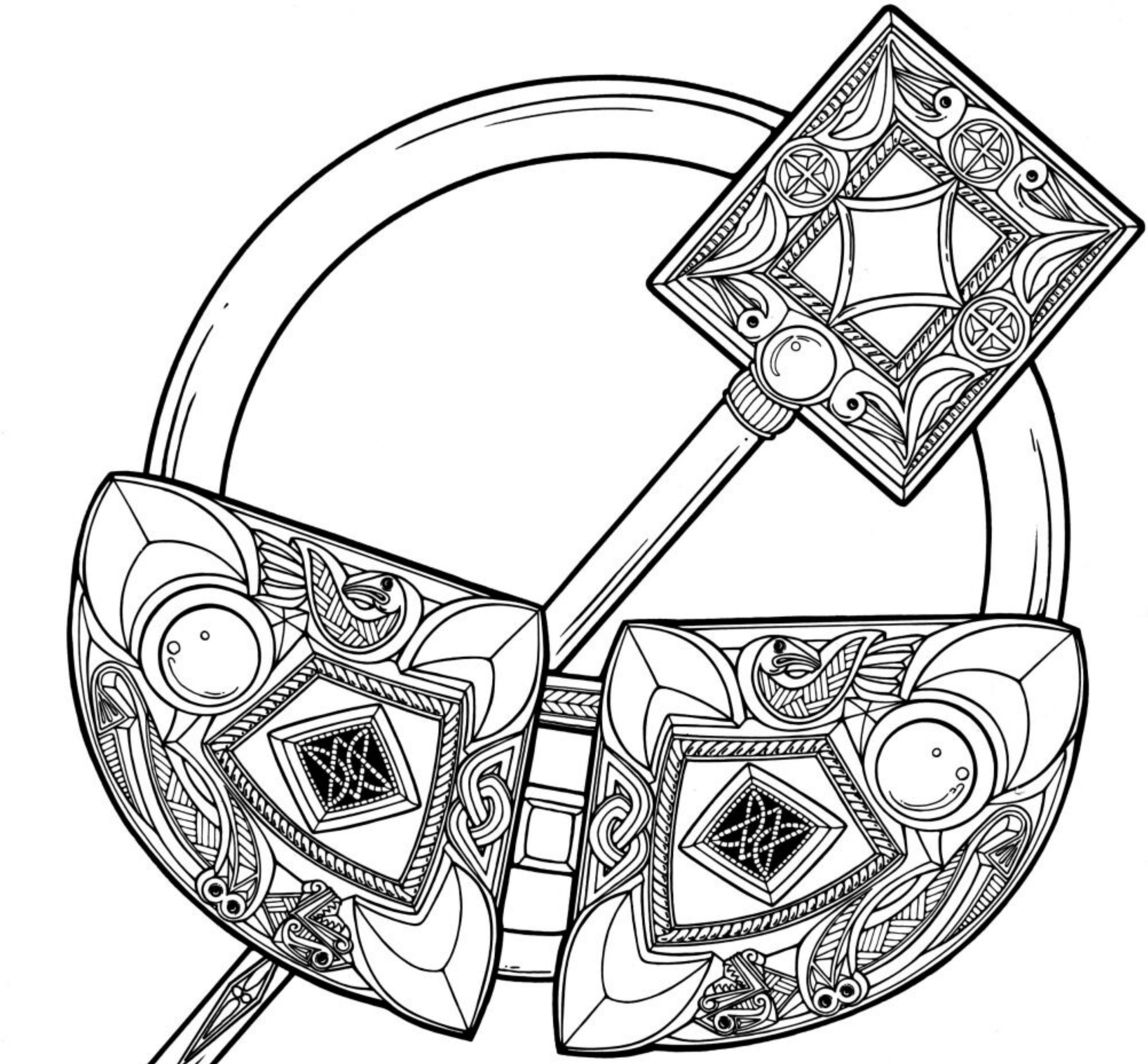

For hundreds of years the inhabitants of Ireland fastened their cloaks shut with brooches made of a ring and a long pin. This one is very large—its pin is 10" long. According to Old Irish law, a man's rank determined the materials and size of the brooches he could wear. If the pin of his brooch extended beyond his shoulder, he was liable for any injury it might inflict on his neighbor.

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A little after the year 700, a brooch was made in Ireland in a shape similar to the one which you have just seen, but covered on all sides with elaborate designs made out of silver and gold. Here and on the next page you can see some details drawn from the animal ornament of this amazing piece of jewelry. Here two dogs with stripey bodies and spiral joints cross each other and fit into a panel no bigger than a postage stamp.

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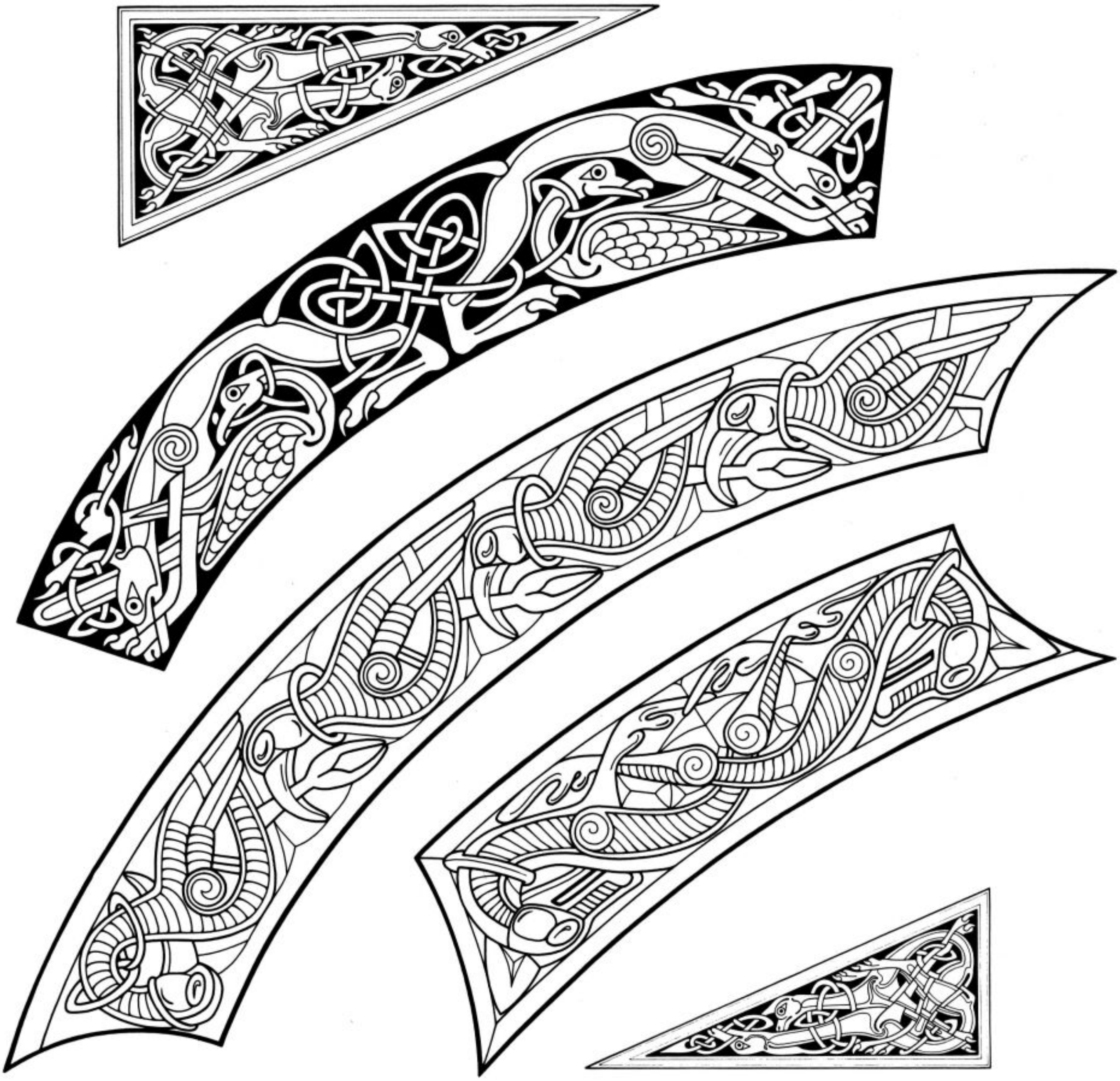
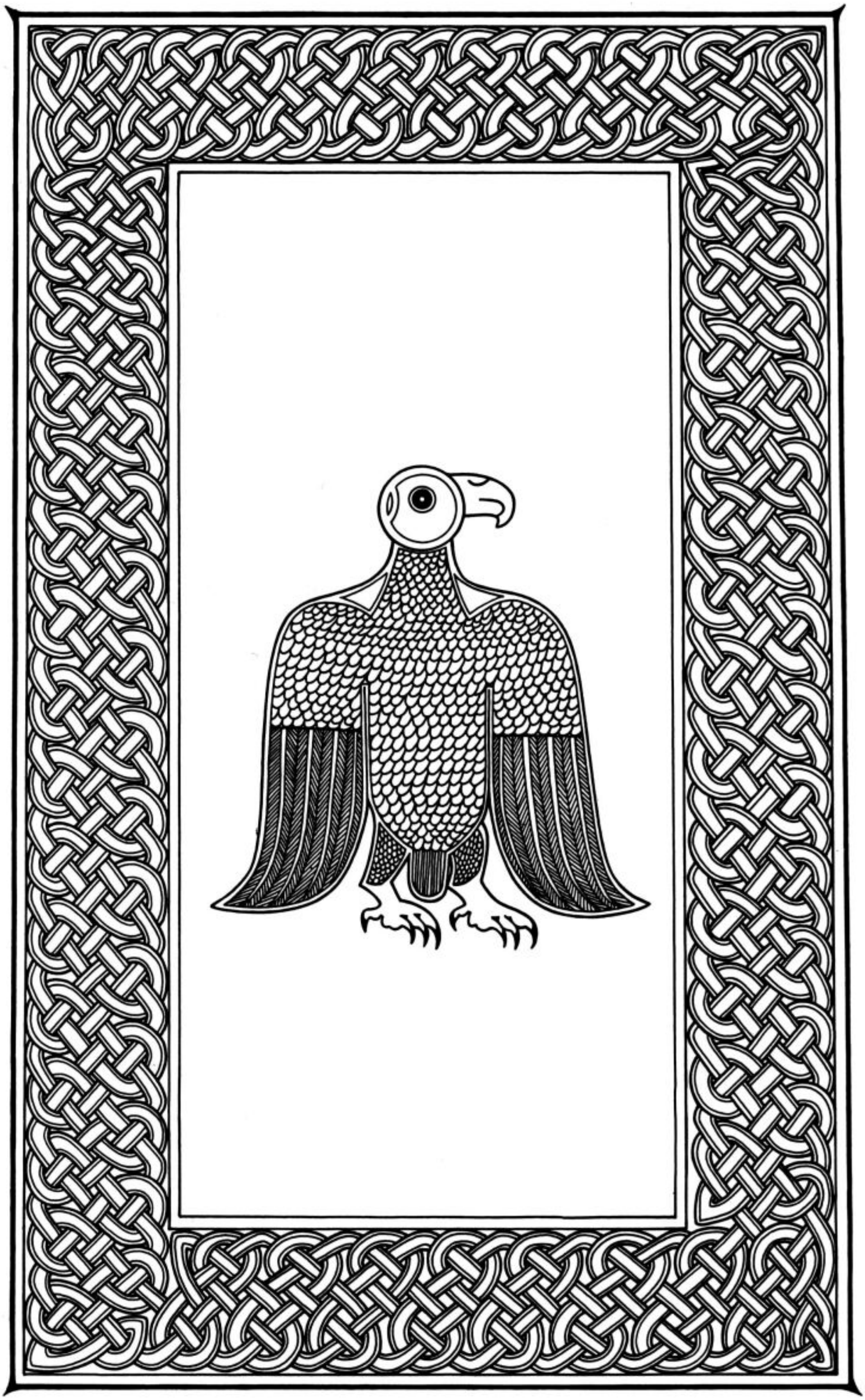
The birds and beasts on the top and bottom come from a book made in the north of England. Their similarity to the Tara birds shows how close the connection between Ireland and England was around 700 A.D.



Here are two curved processions of birds and dogs, each one biting the leg of the next in line. Like the dogs on the Tara brooch seen on the last page, their joints are marked with spirals, here in the base of their wings. Both birds and dogs are made of silver coated with gold, forming only a tiny part of the splendor of the whole brooch. This tiny treasure, the brooch itself, was found by some children playing with their pails and shovels near the seashore in Ireland, about a hundred years ago. How would you like to find something like that?

This eagle is a different kind of bird from those lined up on the Tara Brooch. Instead of being made of silver and gold, it comes from a page in a book where it is drawn with ink and paint. Books were first brought to Ireland by teachers of Christianity, and after accepting the new religion the Irish learned to make their own Christian books. This eagle and the pictures on the next six pages are from the Book of Durrow.



f 84 v

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f 192 v

The Book of Durrow was probably not made in Ireland. The biting and knotting animals on this page are so similar to animals on English jewelry that the book may have been made in England too. After the Irish became Christian and learned how to write, they sailed out of Ireland to teach others. They went north, along the coast of Scotland, and founded a monastery at a tiny island called Iona. (Some people think the Book of Durrow was made there.) From there they went to the mainland of Britain, to the area of northern England called Northumbria, where they taught the English how to write. English and Irish artists then worked side by side, sharing ideas with each other for the decoration of beautiful books.

→

You have seen spiral patterns like this before, on the pagan Celtic sword and trumpet from Ireland. Here they are brought into the Book of Durrow, where the ancient Celtic pattern is taken over for the new Christian book.

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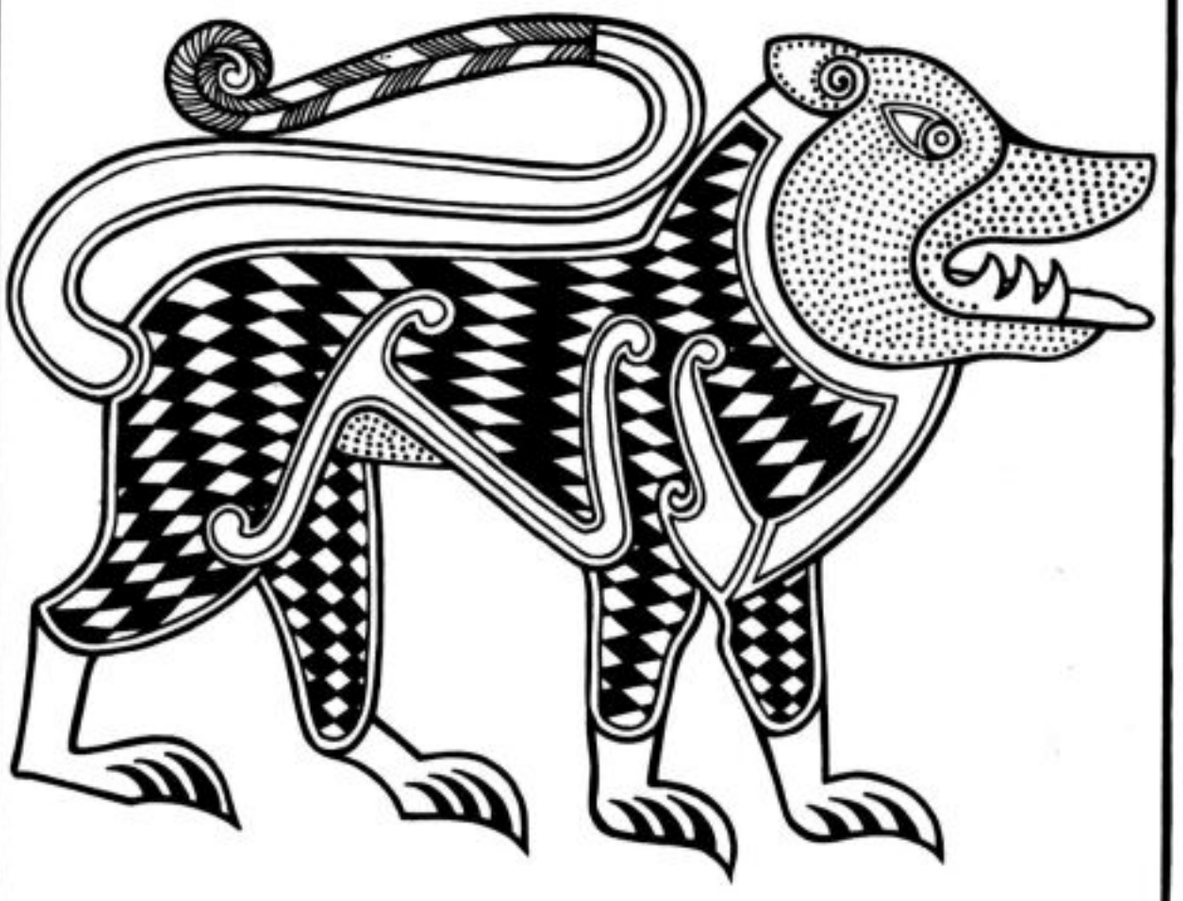
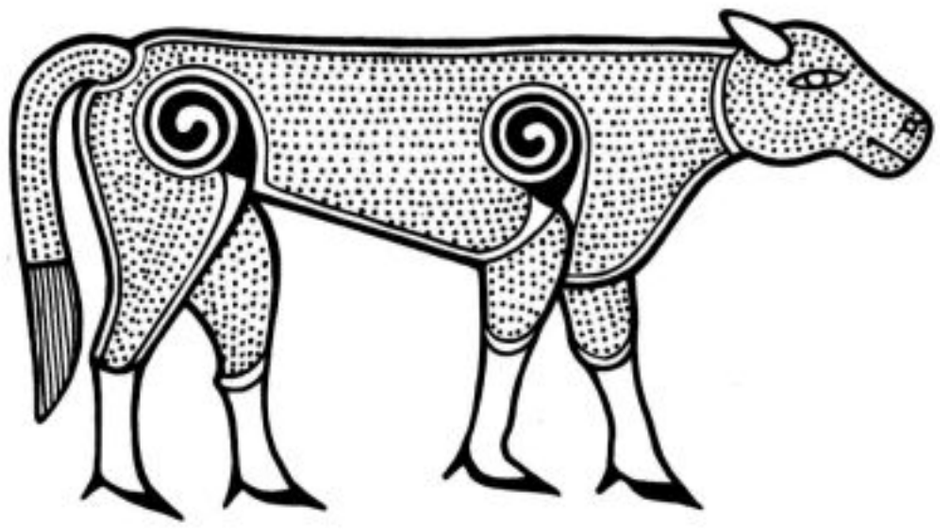
f 3v



This handsome lion stalks across a page in the *manuscript* called the Book of Durrow. The word *manuscript* comes from the Latin words for *hand* and *write*, and refers to books made and written by hand. In the seventh century, when Durrow was written, there was no other way to make books, as printing had not yet been invented.

f 191 v

Books in those days were not written on paper, but on strong velvety vellum, made from the skins of young animals, most often calves like the one you see here. The skin had to be scraped and bleached and stretched to be made into vellum. Then it was written on, folded, and bound between covers to make a manuscript.



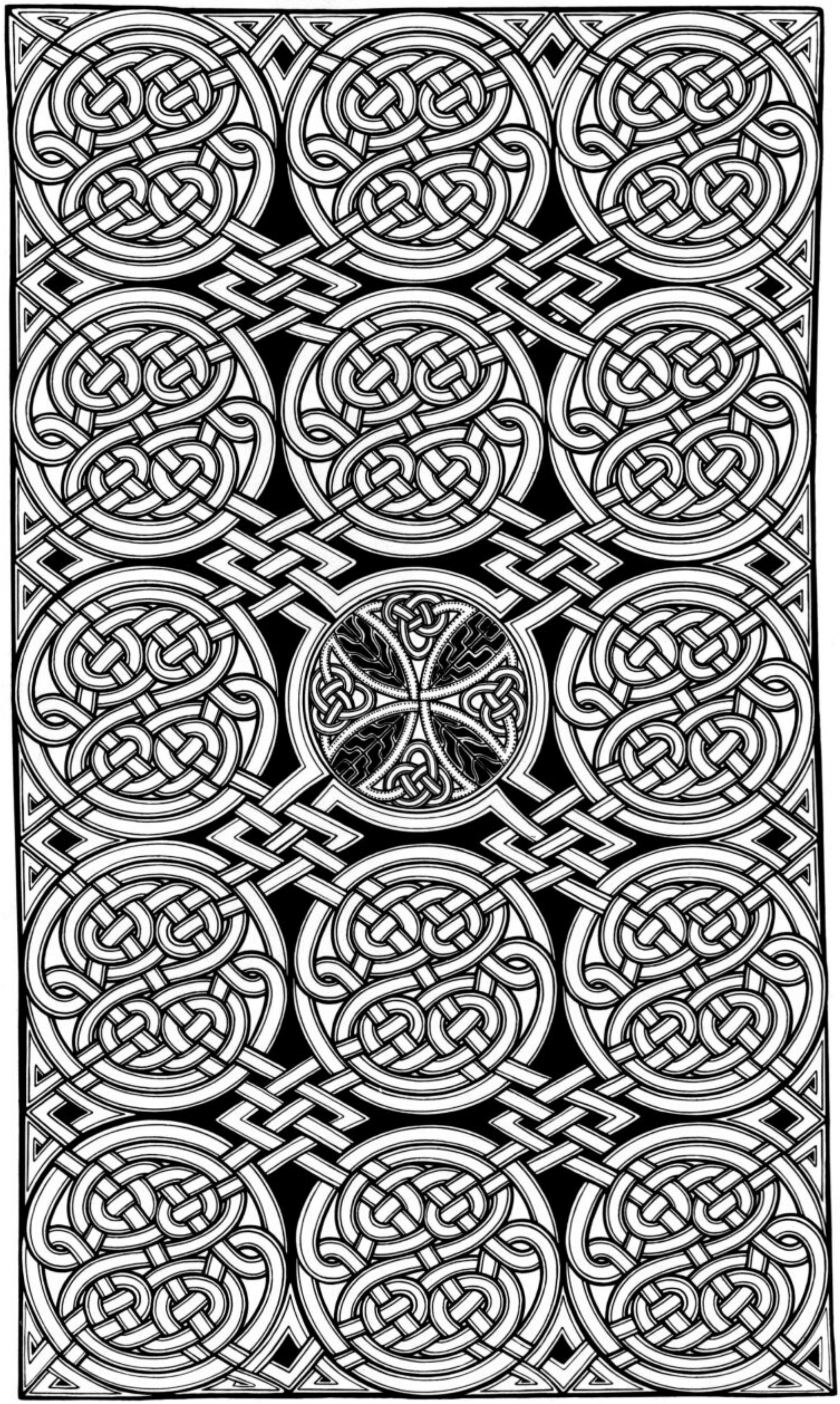
f 124 v

xLR8

This funny creature with no arms is meant to be a man. Like the eagle, lion and calf you have already seen, he is a symbol for an Evangelist. The four Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, are the authors of the four Gospels, the story of the life and teaching of Christ. The Book of Durrow is a Gospel Book, and one of these beasts or symbols is at the beginning of each Gospel, like a title page. The man is the symbol for Matthew and he stands opposite the first words in the Gospel according to St. Matthew.

f 21 v

Besides pictures of Evangelist symbols, the Book of Durrow has pages covered with ornamental patterns, like the interlocking animals and the spiral pages you have already seen. Here is another one, filled with strong circular knots. These are called carpet pages, and they are like decorated book covers, marking the divisions between the Gospels.



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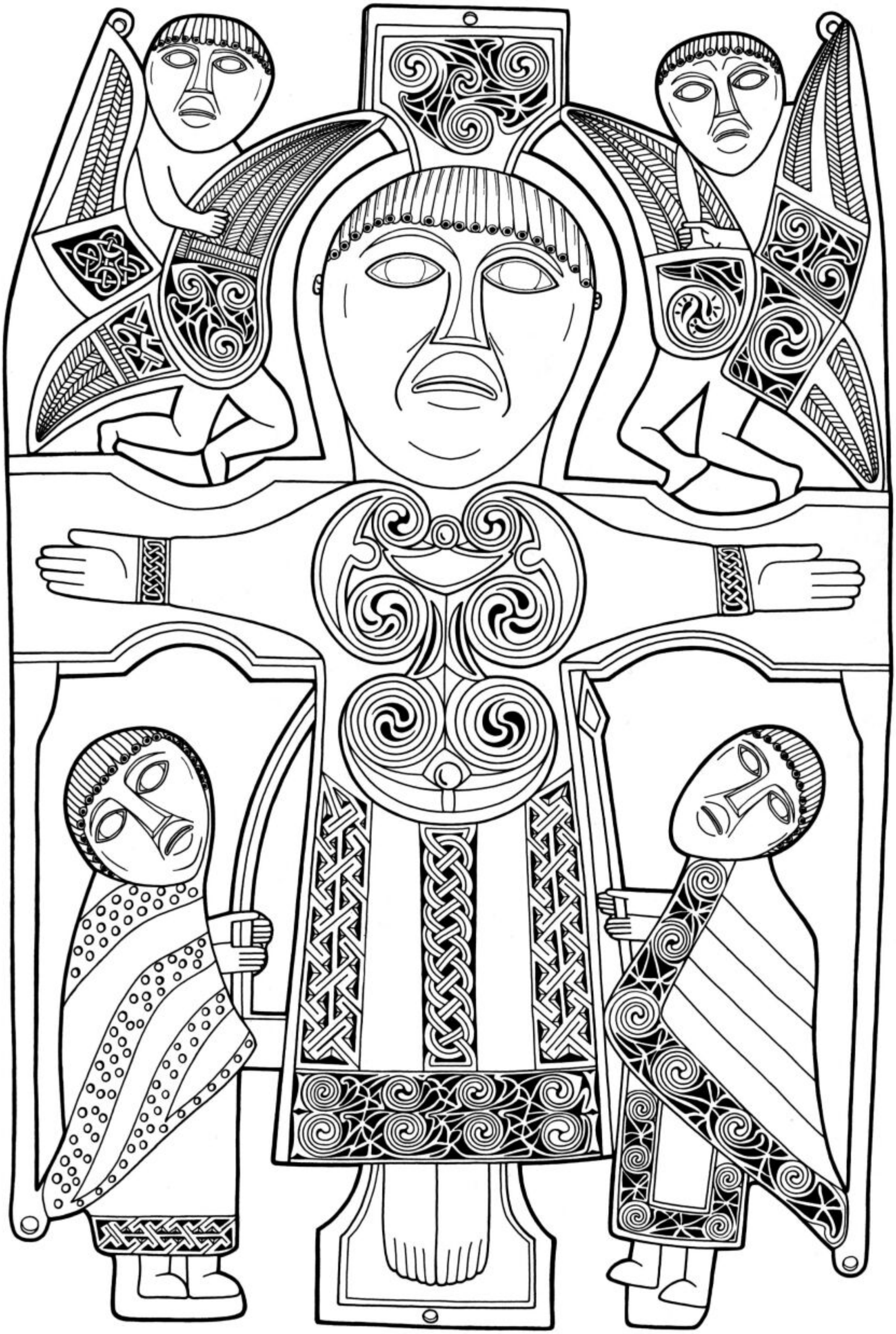

Not all book covers were decorated with patterns. In Ireland in the 8th century, a monk made a bronze plaque showing the crucifixion scene you see here, and it was probably mounted on a book cover. The stiff figure of Christ covers almost the whole cross. Two angels fly around His head. The two little men below are described in the Gospels. The one at the right holds a spear along the edge of Christ's body, and the one on the left is meant to be holding a sponge at the end of a long pole. Spiral patterns from the pagan Celtic past decorate the robe of Christ and the angels' wings.

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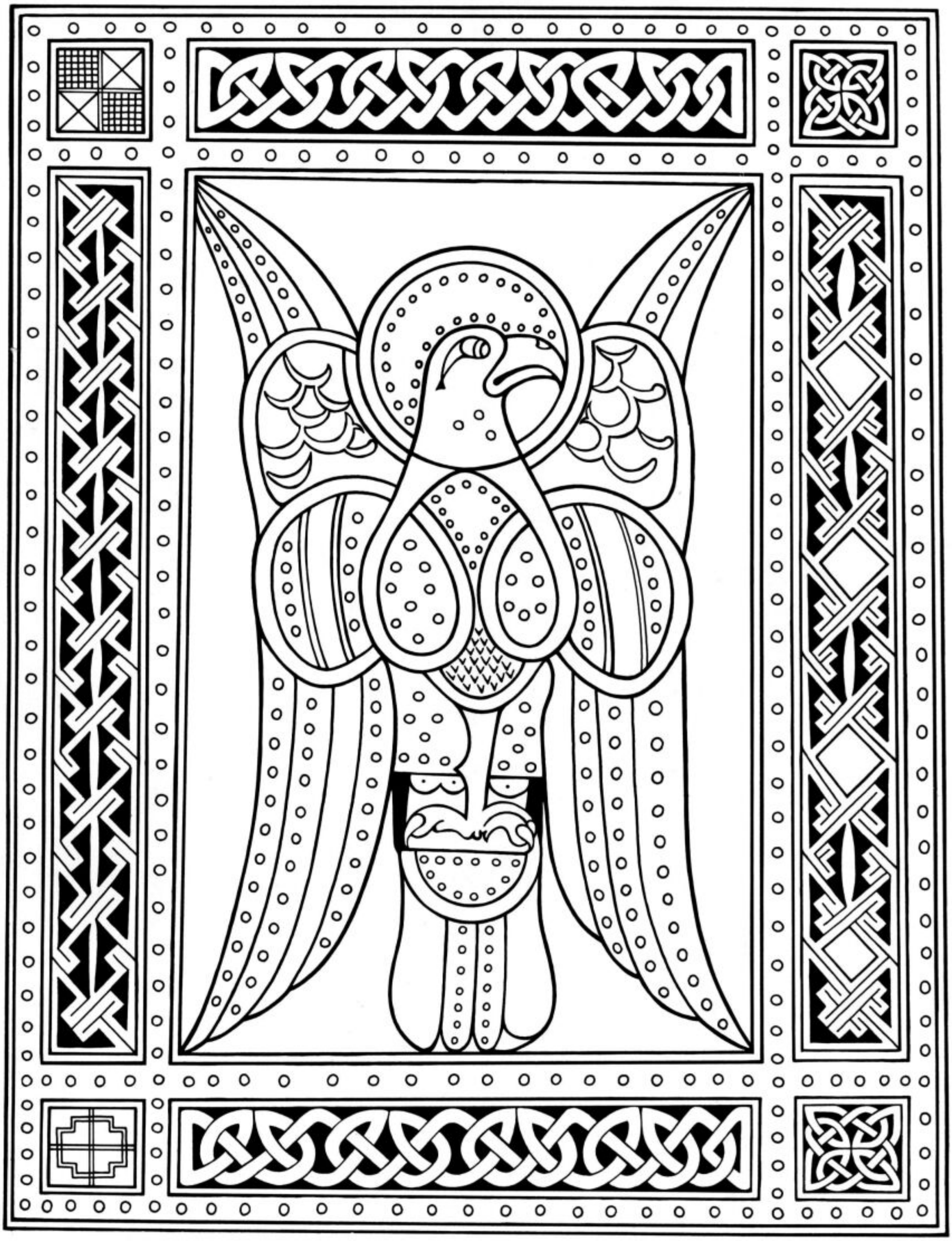

Not all books made in Ireland were originally covered with elaborate bronze plaques. This eagle, symbol of the Evangelist John, comes from a little book not much bigger than your hand. It is from a pocket Gospel called the Book of Dimma, and its small size made it relatively cheap and portable. It was probably carried in a leather satchel by a travelling missionary or wandering scholar who wanted to keep the scriptures with him on his journey.

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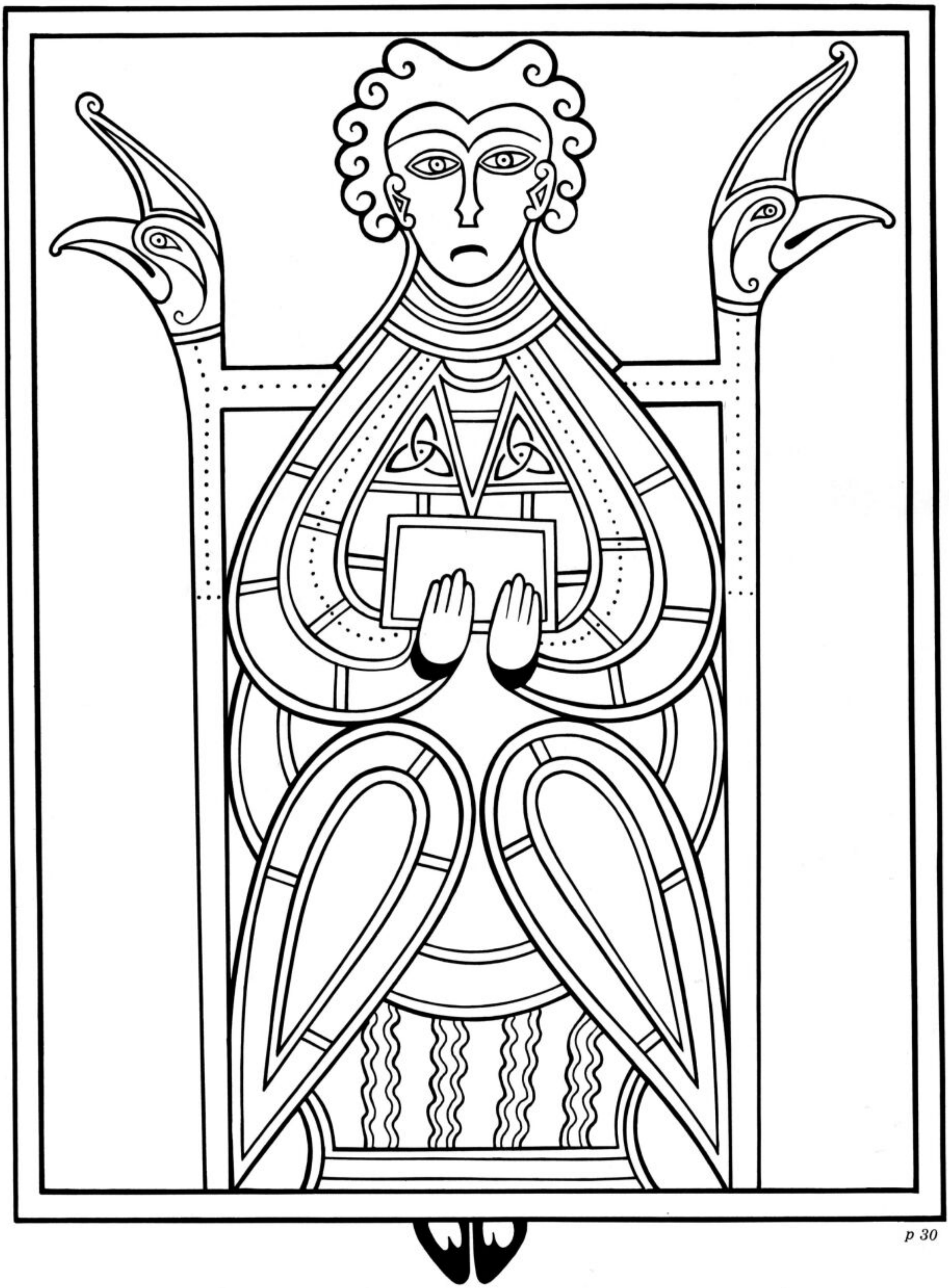
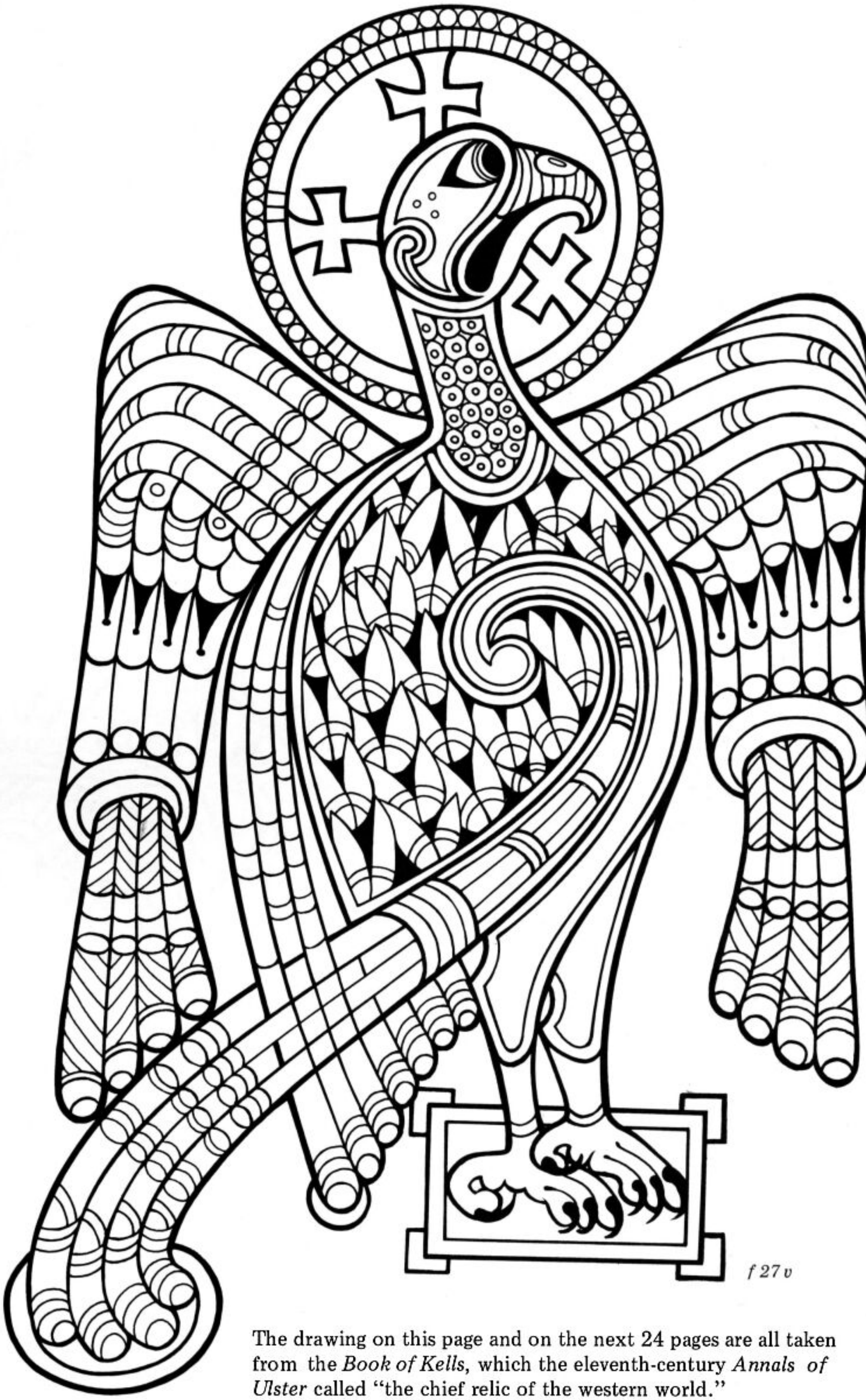


"Fine craftsmanship is all about you, but you might not notice it. Look more keenly at it and you will penetrate to the very shrine of art. You will make out intricacies, so delicate and subtle, so exact and compact, so full of knots and links, with colors so fresh and vivid, that you might say that all this was the work of an angel, and not of a man."

←

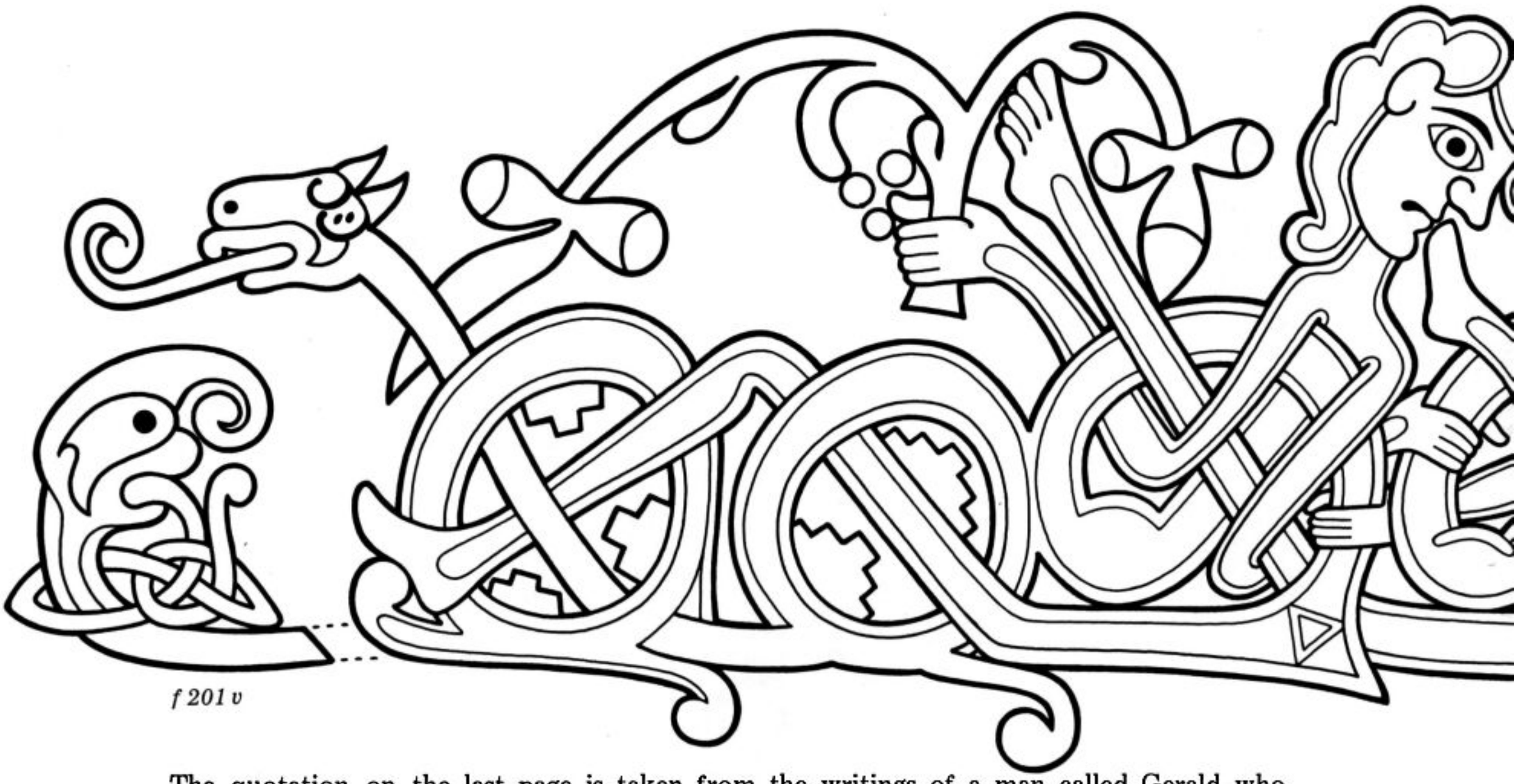
This is a portrait of the Evangelist Mark from the Book of Dimma. The author proudly shows his calling by holding his Gospel before him in pudgy fingers. He makes a solemn little figure, with his sad mouth and staring eyes. The birds' heads are meant to be decorations attached to his throne, but they are more lifelike than the strange shapes used for Mark's clothing. He is a rather small Evangelist, for a little, private manuscript.



f 27 v

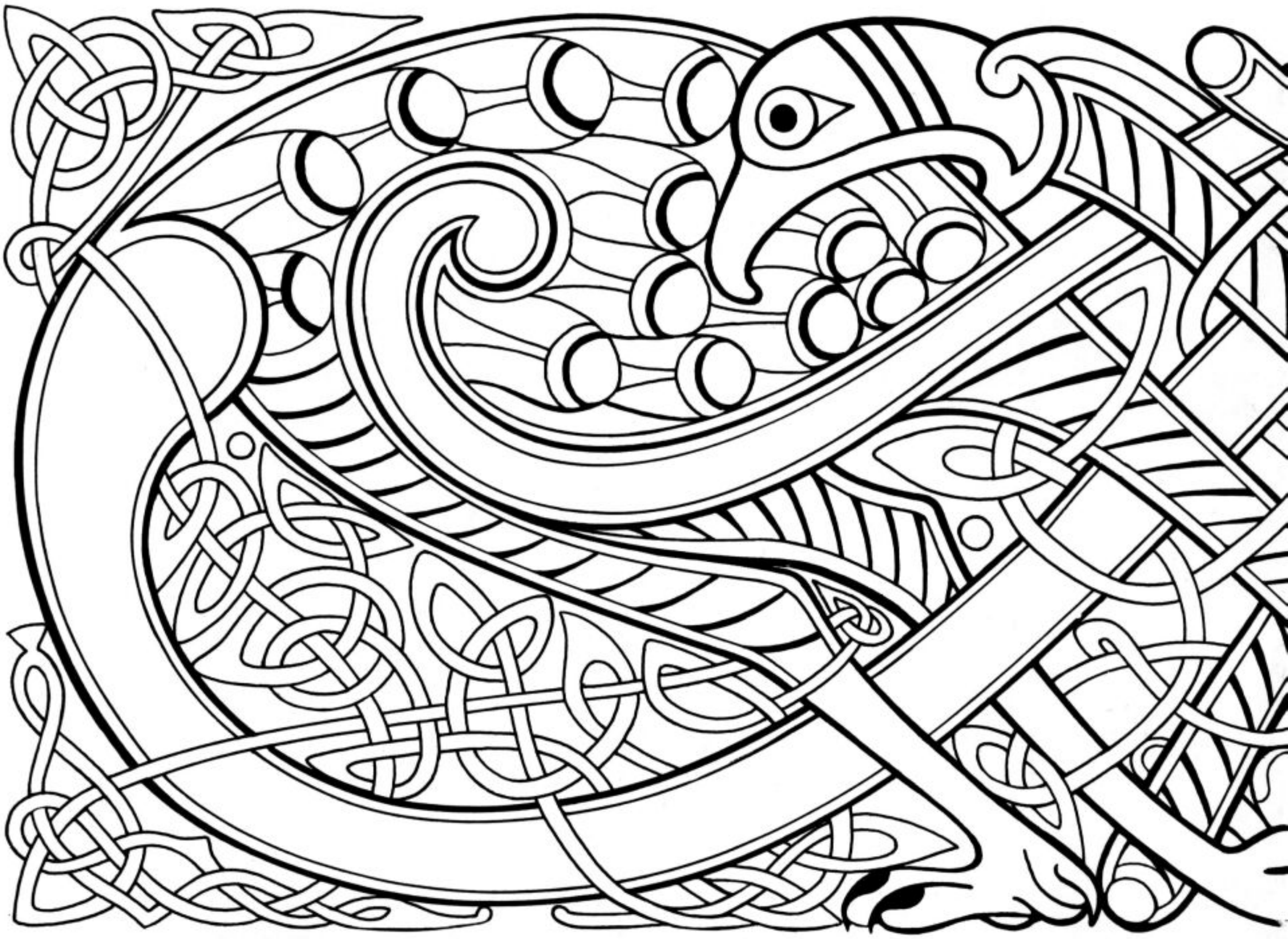
The drawing on this page and on the next 24 pages are all taken from the *Book of Kells*, which the eleventh-century *Annals of Ulster* called "the chief relic of the western world."

xLR8



f 201 v

The quotation on the last page is taken from the writings of a man called Gerald who travelled from Wales to Ireland in the twelfth century. He was describing a great Gospel
f 202 r Book he saw there, a manuscript which must have been very similar to the Book of Kells.



xLR8

Sometimes to see the jokes in the Book of Kells you have to look sideways. In the original manuscript, these little men are stacked one above the other, and it's not too hard to see that each is a letter **Q**. When you look at them this side up, you can enjoy their rockette-style can-can dancing, and find the man whose toes tickle the nose of his neighbor.

xLR8

f 129 v

You are already familiar with the four symbols of the Evangelists as they appeared in the Book of Durrow. In the Book of Kells, the four symbols often appear together on a single page, as if to show how well they get along together. Here are the eagle of John (inside the circle) with the lion of Mark and the calf of Luke. The fourth symbol, the man of Matthew, is on a different part of this page in the original Book of Kells.

f 130 r

Although it is a Latin Gospel Book like the Book of Dimma, the book of Kells was made for a different purpose. It was not meant to be shut up in a library for scholars to study, and is too large to be carried by travelling missionaries. This complicated design is only a small section taken from a page completely covered with richly painted patterns. Such lavish decoration made the Kells a luxury manuscript, intended for display on the altar of a church.

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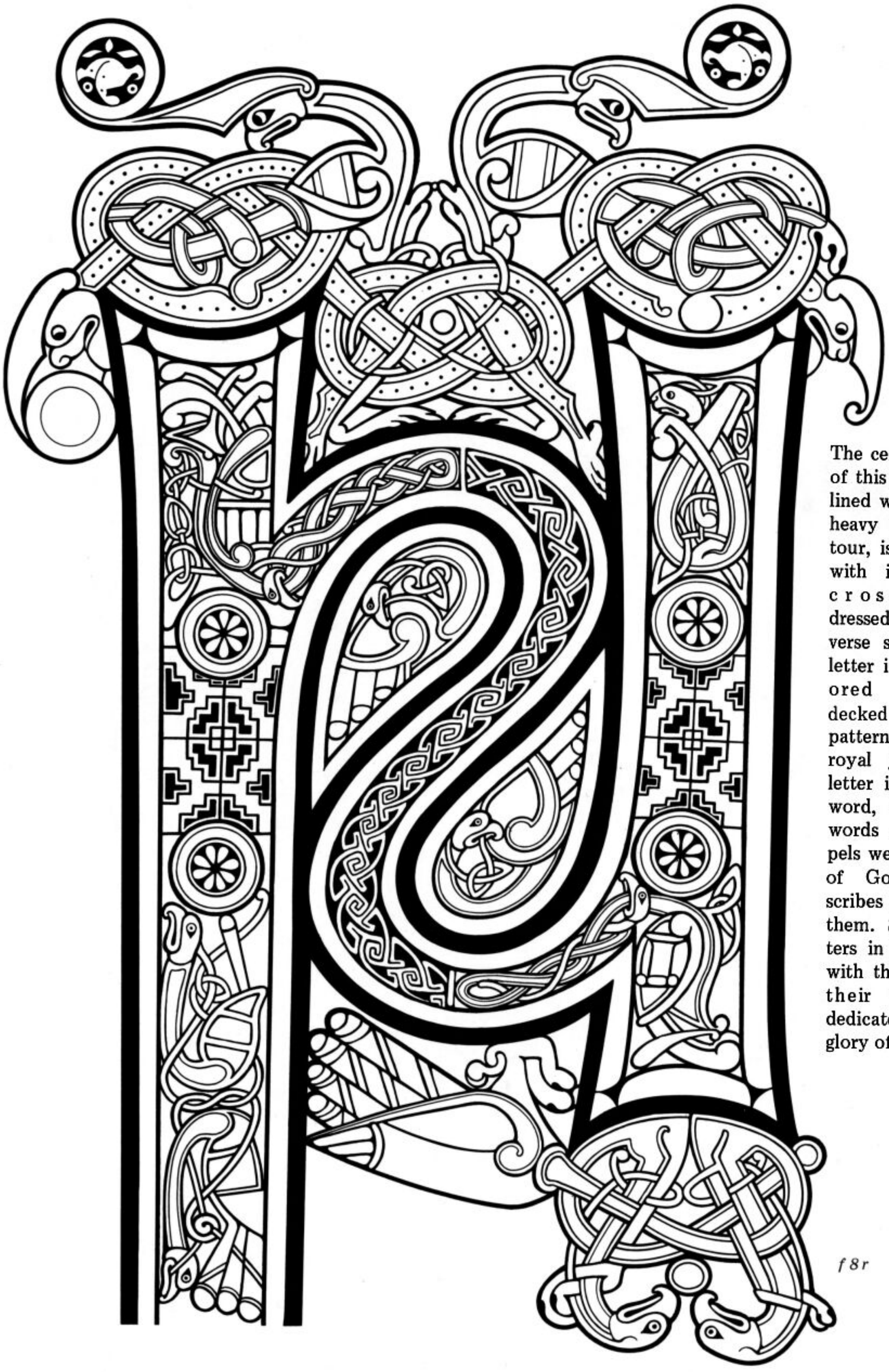
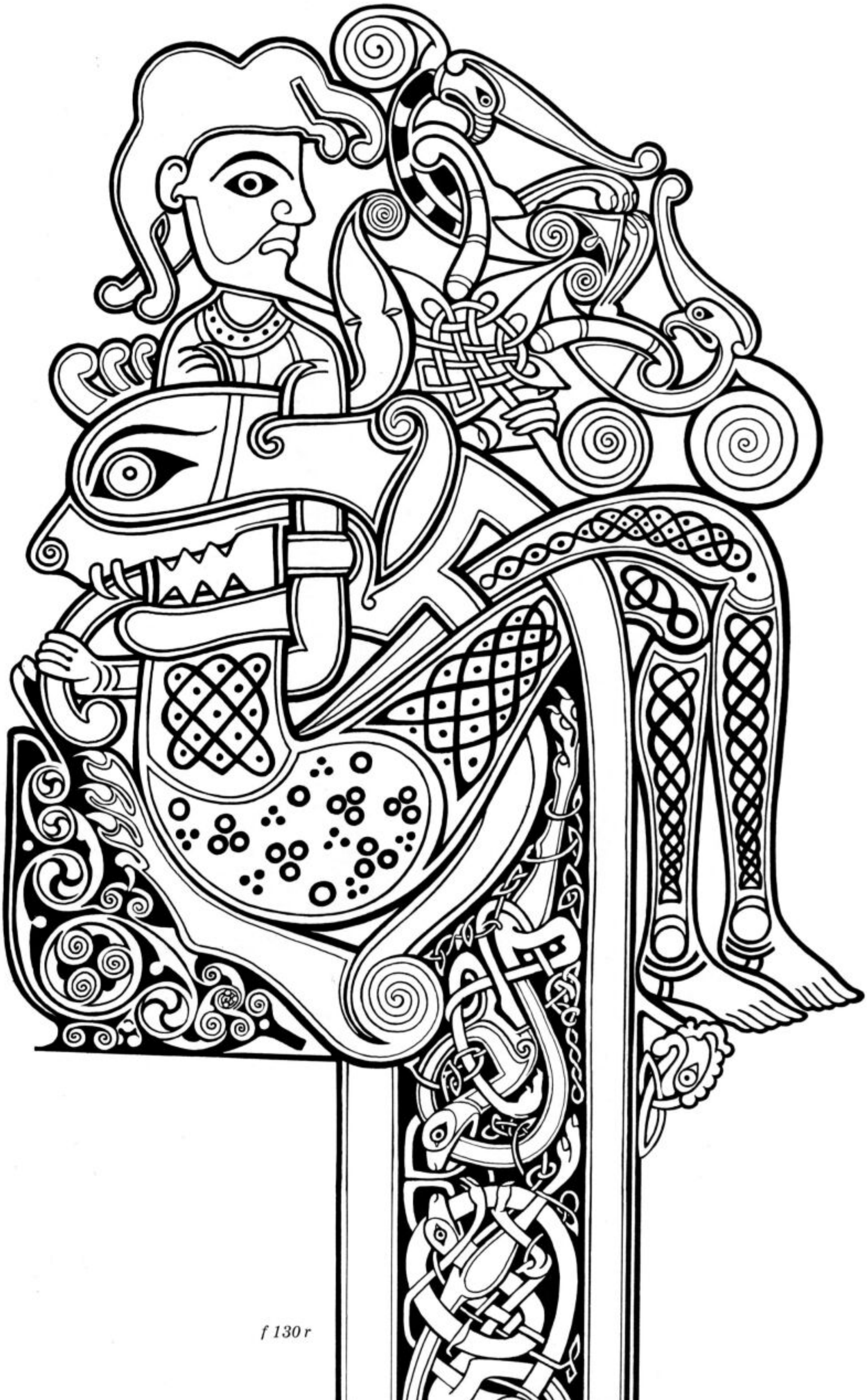


The central feature of this design, outlined with an extra heavy black contour, is a letter N, with its diagonal cross-stroke dressed up as a reverse s-curve. The letter itself is honored by being decked out with patterns as fine as royal jewels. The letter is part of a word, and all the words of the gospels were the Word of God to the scribes who wrote them. So the letters in Kells swell with the weight of their decoration, dedicated to the glory of God.

f 8r

xLR8



Look how the beard of the man here on this page goes through a series of changes between leaving his chin and being grasped by his hand: it hides behind the ear of the biting beast, and changes from beard to knot to spiral and scroll. Such flowing from one pattern motif to another is typical of art made in the British Isles in the later eighth and early ninth century, and may indicate that the Book of Kells was made around the year 800.

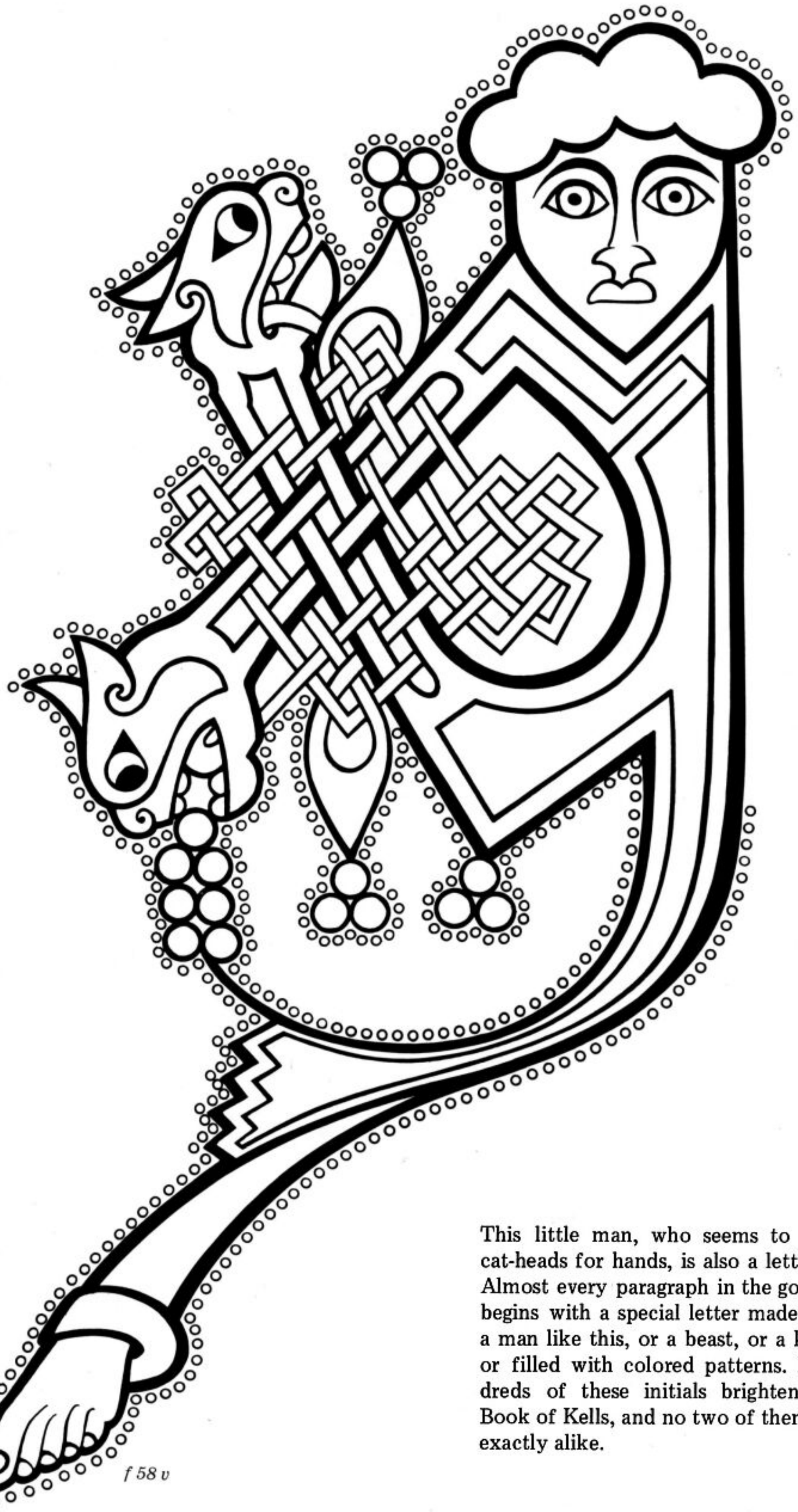
f 130 r

xLR8

Adapted from *f 292 r*

This organized knot is made of the bodies of snakelike creatures. Snakes inhabit the books kept in Ireland in the Middle Ages, but real live snakes didn't live in Ireland itself. The respected and intelligent English historian, the Venerable Bede, wrote in 731 that the air of Ireland was fatal to snakes, and that books which had come from Ireland could be used to cure snakebite. Medicine could be made by soaking the scrapings of Irish books in water: as soon as the victim swallowed this potion, the snakebite would stop swelling and the victim would be healed.

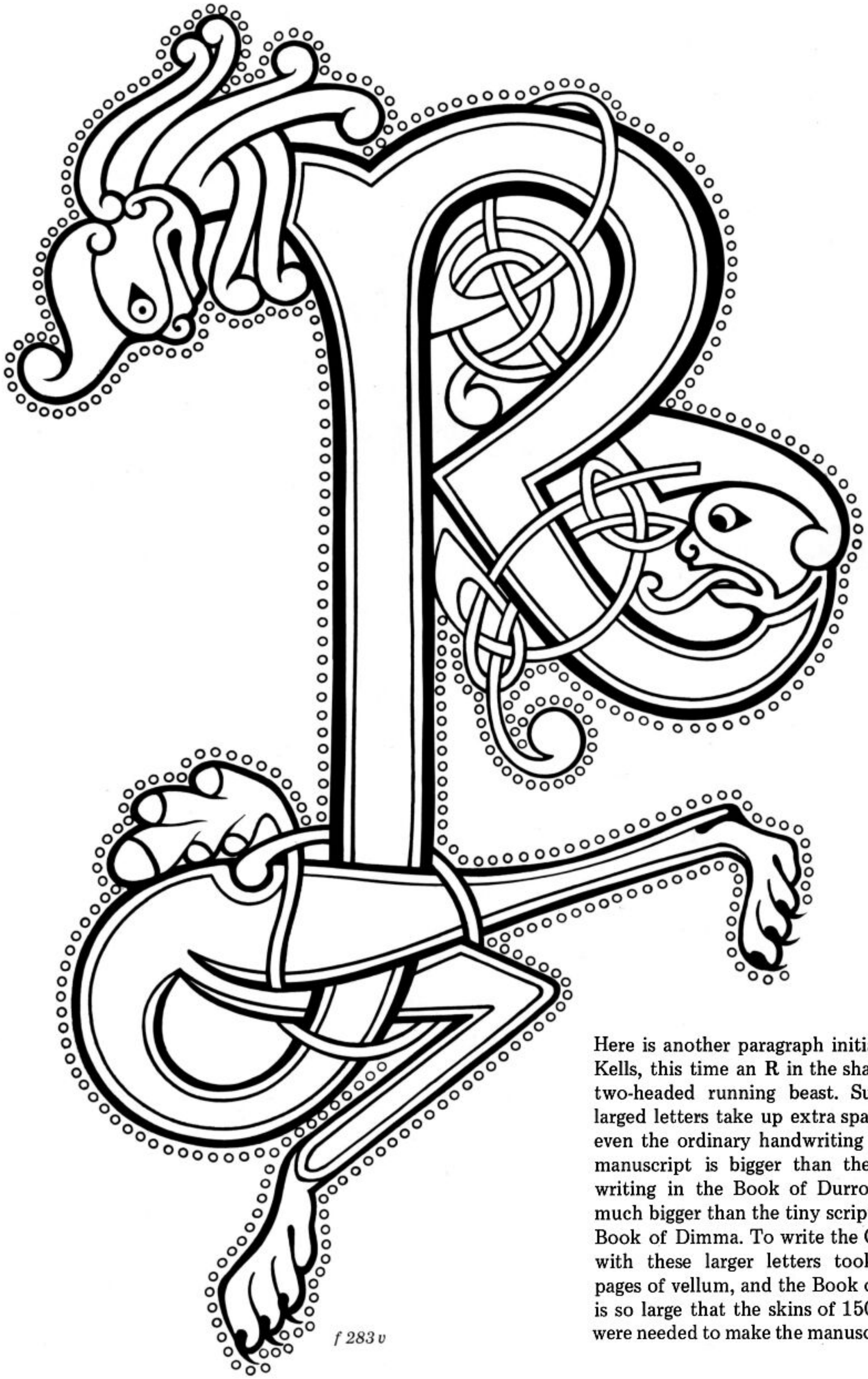
xLR8



f 58 v

This little man, who seems to have cat-heads for hands, is also a letter **Q**. Almost every paragraph in the gospels begins with a special letter made into a man like this, or a beast, or a knot, or filled with colored patterns. Hundreds of these initials brighten the Book of Kells, and no two of them are exactly alike.

xLR8



f 283 v

Here is another paragraph initial from Kells, this time an **R** in the shape of a two-headed running beast. Such enlarged letters take up extra space, and even the ordinary handwriting on this manuscript is bigger than the handwriting in the Book of Durrow, and much bigger than the tiny script in the Book of Dimma. To write the Gospels with these larger letters took extra pages of vellum, and the Book of Kells is so large that the skins of 150 calves were needed to make the manuscript.

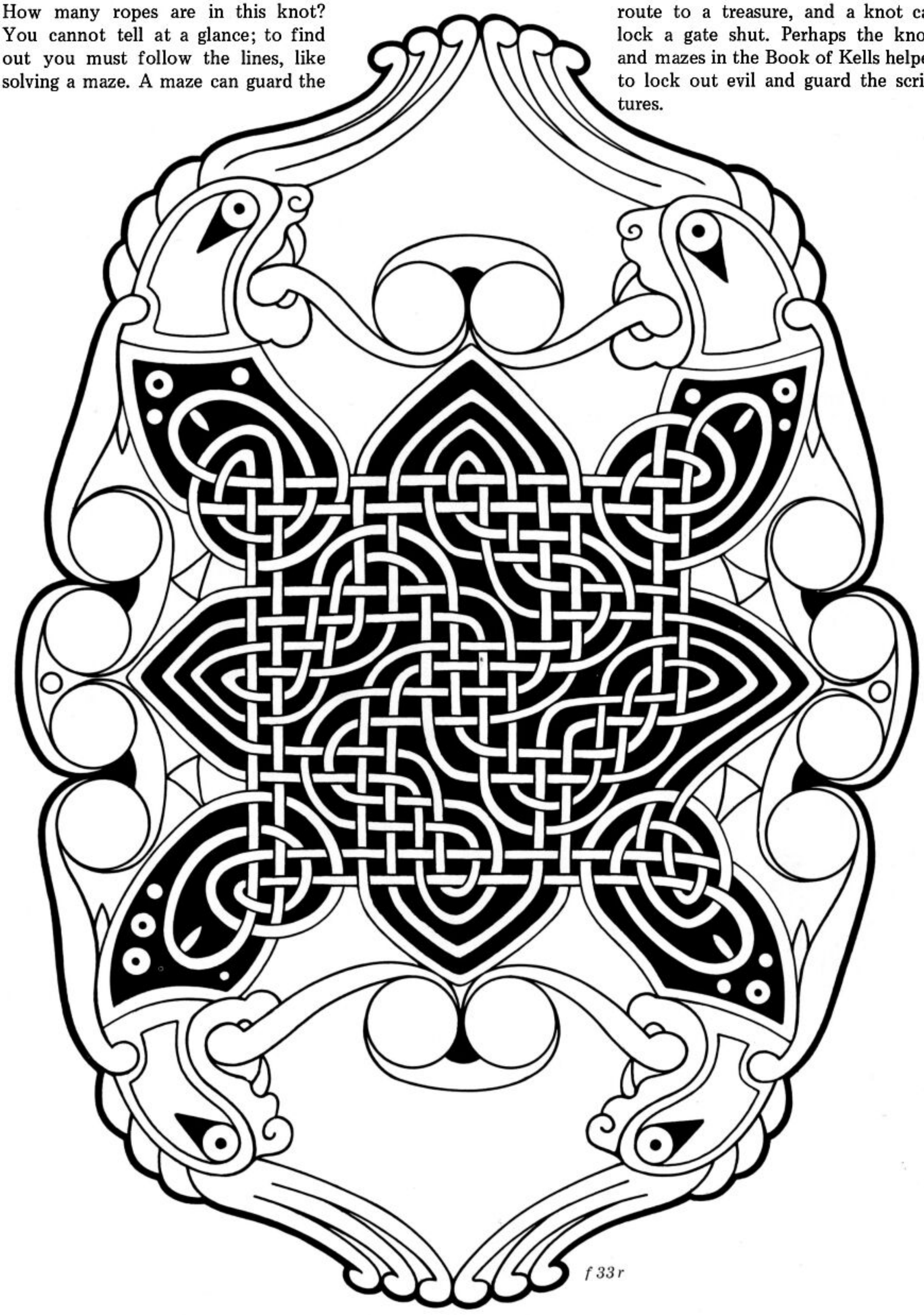
xLR8

Actual size

f 29 r

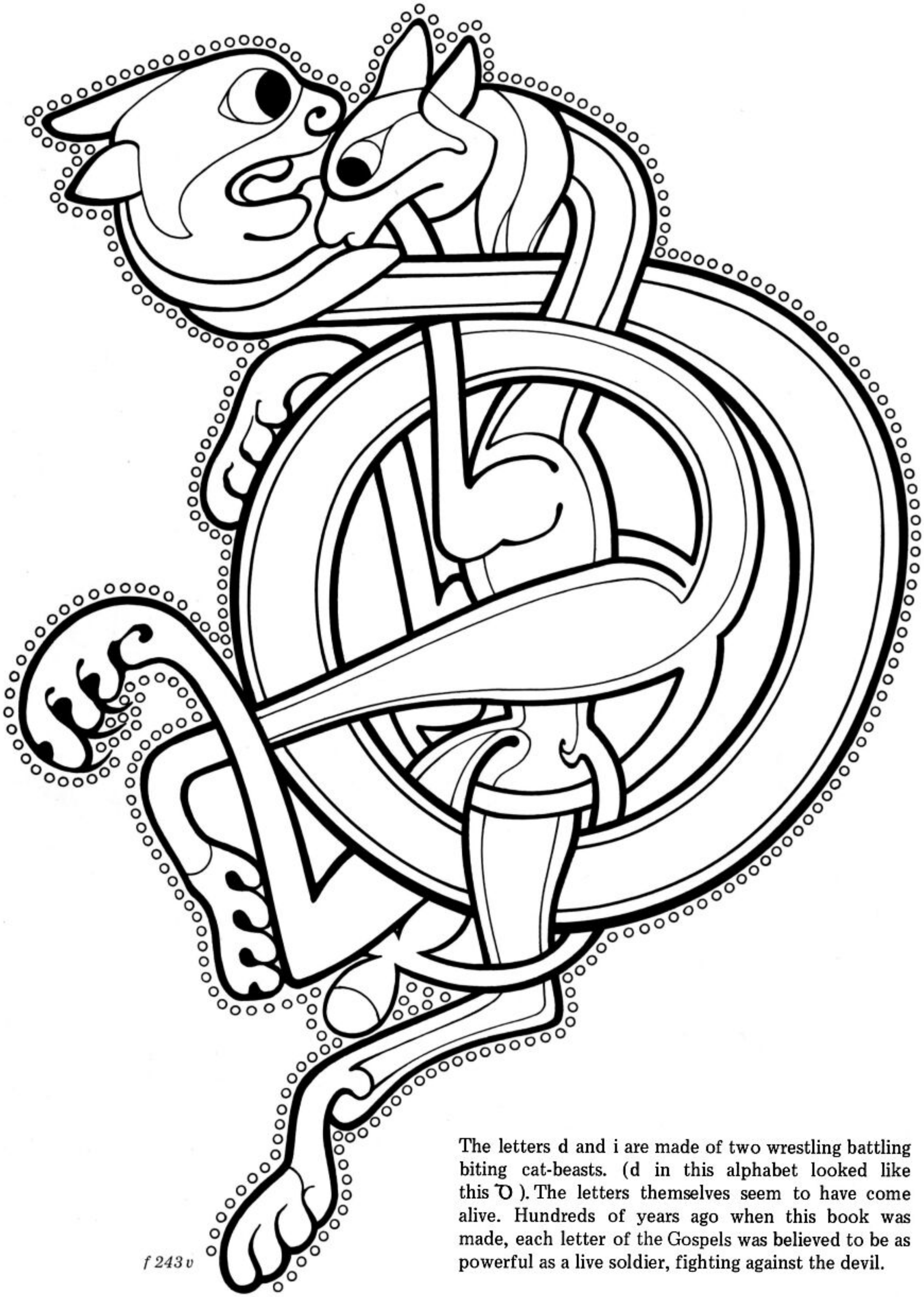
Although the Book of Kells is very large, it contains tiny treasures. This circle of six interlocking birds fills a space in the original manuscript which is hardly larger than your thumbnail. Imagine how hard it must have been to color it when it was that small.

How many ropes are in this knot? You cannot tell at a glance; to find out you must follow the lines, like solving a maze. A maze can guard the route to a treasure, and a knot can lock a gate shut. Perhaps the knots and mazes in the Book of Kells helped to lock out evil and guard the scriptures.



f 33r

xLR8



f 243 v

The letters d and i are made of two wrestling battling biting cat-beasts. (d in this alphabet looked like this ƍ). The letters themselves seem to have come alive. Hundreds of years ago when this book was made, each letter of the Gospels was believed to be as powerful as a live soldier, fighting against the devil.

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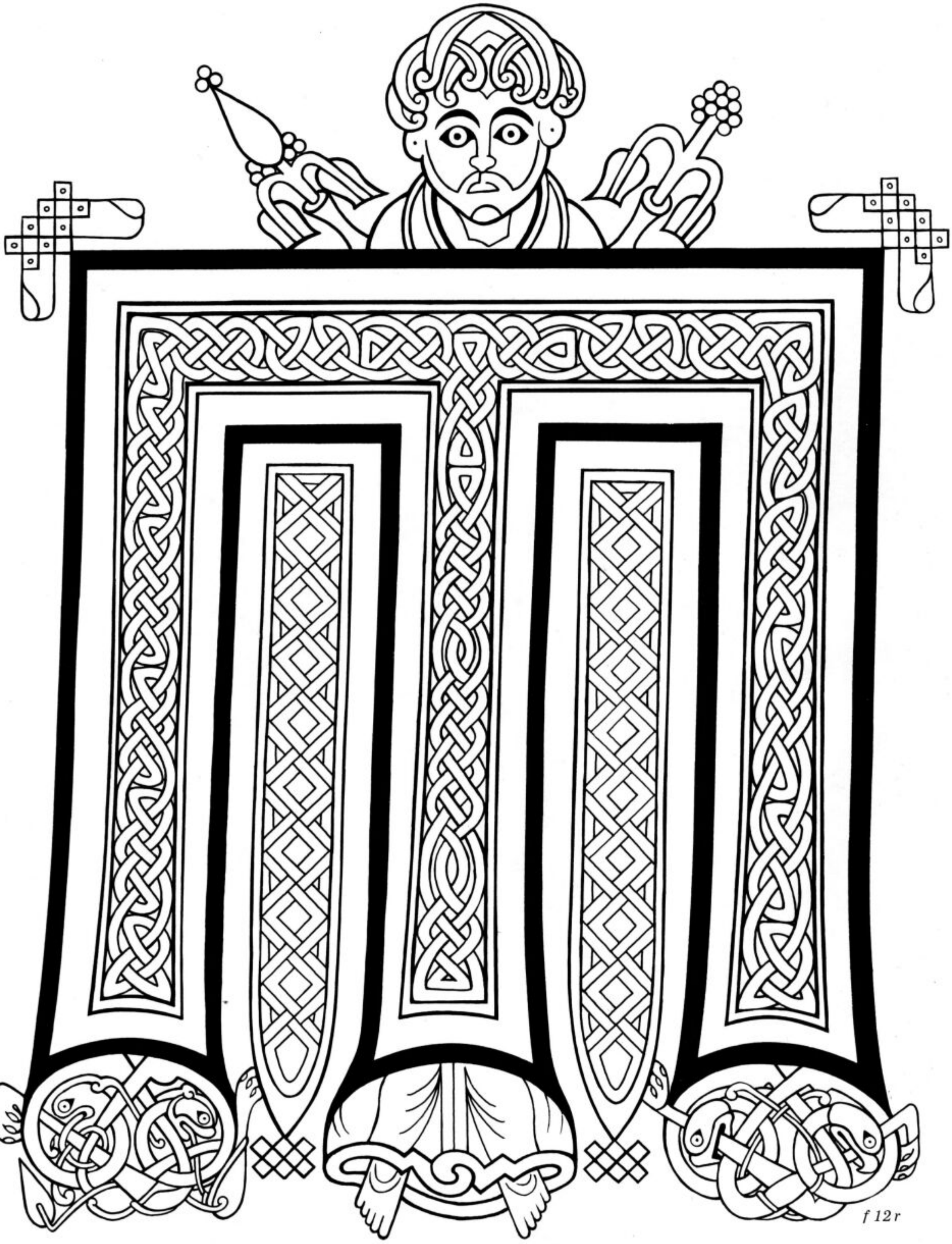


f 12r

xLR8

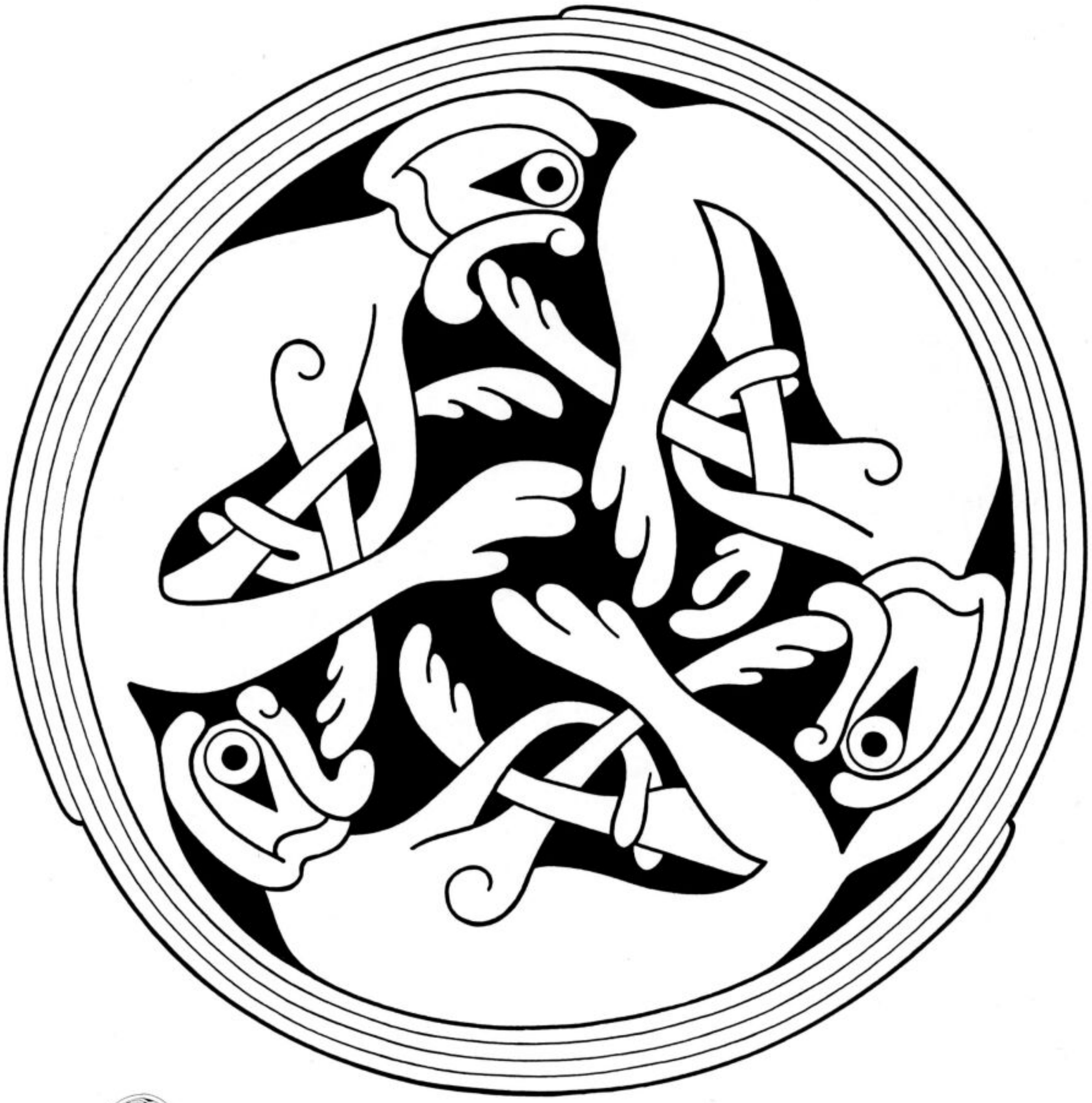
←

The three-legged shape here outlined with a heavy black line represents the letter M, beginning the name of Matthew. The little man standing behind or inside this letter is the Evangelist Matthew himself, or perhaps the man who is his symbol. Man and letter together introduce the preface to Matthew's Gospel.

f 292 r

Some of the ornament in the Book of Kells is many things at once. Here you see a man holding a curled animal on his lap, along with a bird doing a headstand. With a bit of imagination, you can see the man as a harpist, and the beast as an animal-headed harp. Yet all the while, these figures are spelling out the Gospel text, for the animal is also a letter c and the straight back of the man is an i.

xLR8

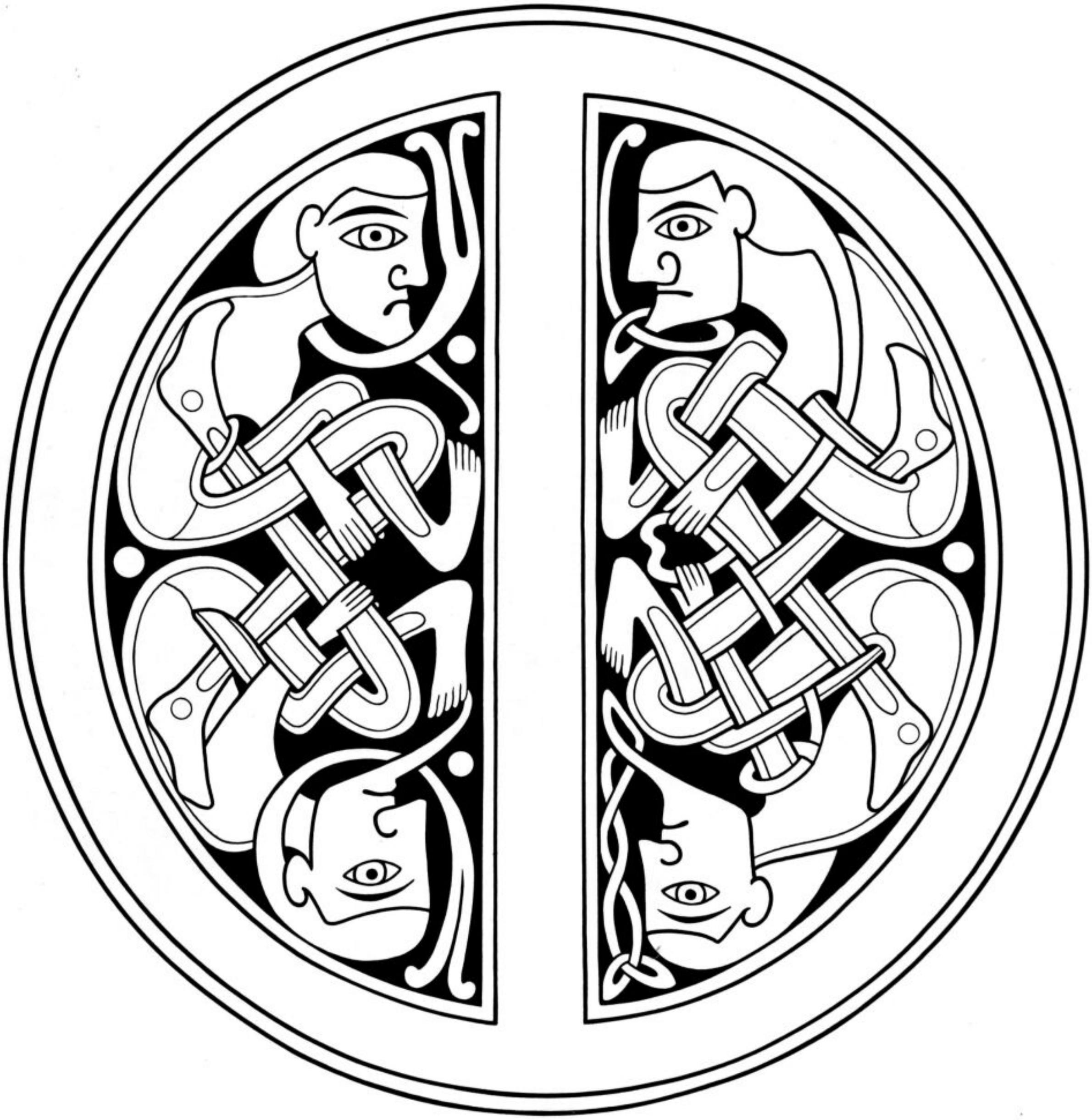


Actual size

f 29 r

The designs in Kells did not all have to mean something. Just filling many pages with patterns made the book a beautiful container for the holy text. Many patterns are not only beautiful but also funny. The artist must have giggled when he drew these three critters, endlessly chasing each other in a circle and tripping over their own front feet.

xLR8



Adapted from *f 7 v*

Often two patterns which look like twins turn out to be different when you look again. Two men fill each half-circle of this design, and at first they seem to fit together in the same way, but follow carefully their beards and hair and even their overlapping arms and legs, and you will find that the artist of Kells never did exactly the same thing twice.

Many patterns in Kells are made of creatures or shapes which had been used before in the art of the British Isles. Look at the wings of these four birds. They join the birds' bodies with a scroll or curve like those which mark the wings of the birds on the Tara Brooch.

f 32 v

Although this lion is different in many ways from the one in the Book of Durrow, they belong to the same family. You can tell they are cousins by the way their tails both follow similar double curves, and the way their tongues stick out through their teeth. Because of this and other similarities to the Book of Durrow and to other works of art from Scotland and Northumbria, scholars disagree on the birthplace of the Book of Kells. Many believe it was made at Iona, but it might have been made elsewhere in Scotland or in Ireland or possibly in England.

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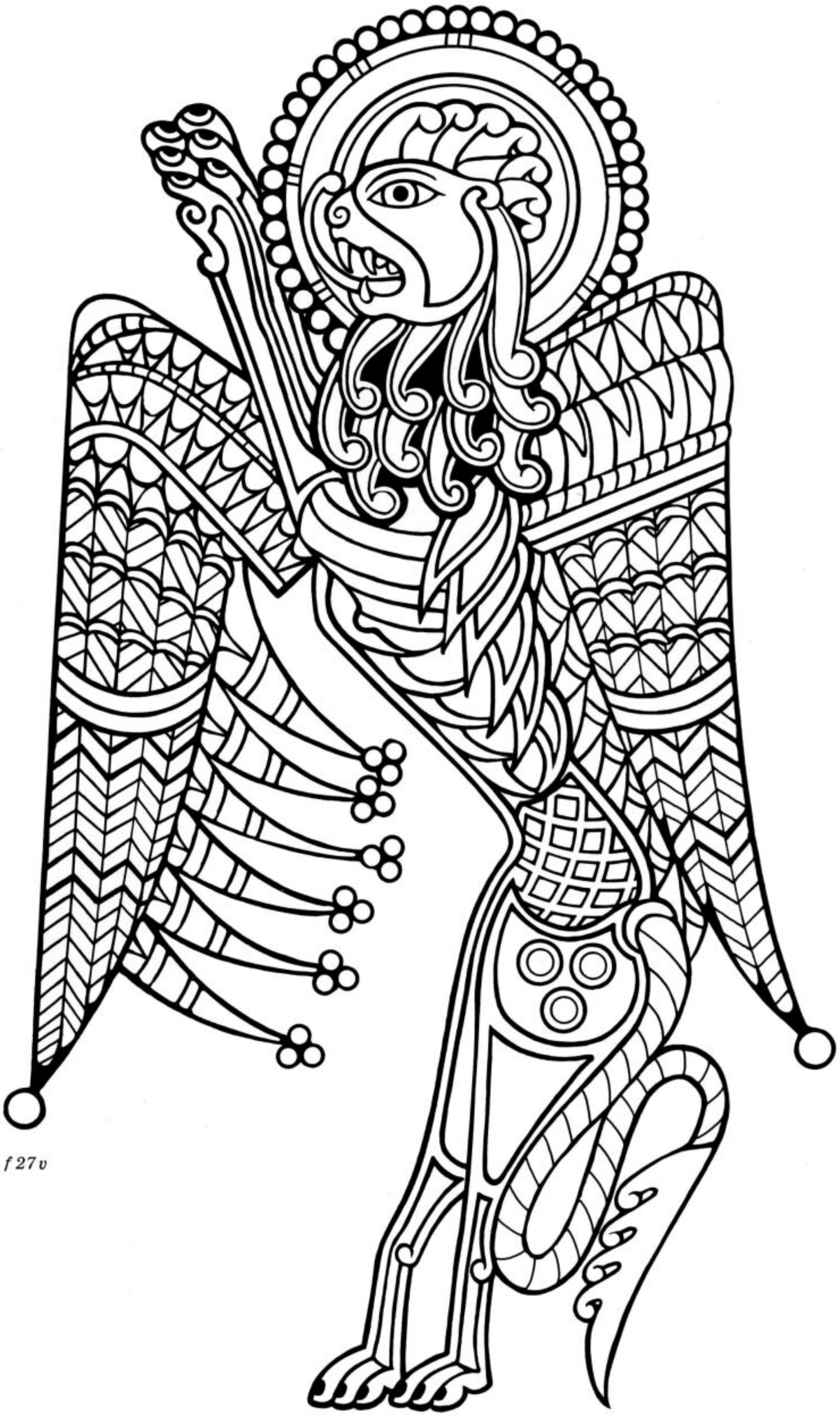

f 27 v

xLR8

Actual size

f 29 r

One thing is sure about the origin of the Book of Kells. It was made in a monastery, a community of people dedicated to worshipping God. To make a manuscript was a form of worship. To make a complicated pattern like this circle of knotted snakes, the artist had to concentrate—learning to draw different designs must have been like memorizing prayers.

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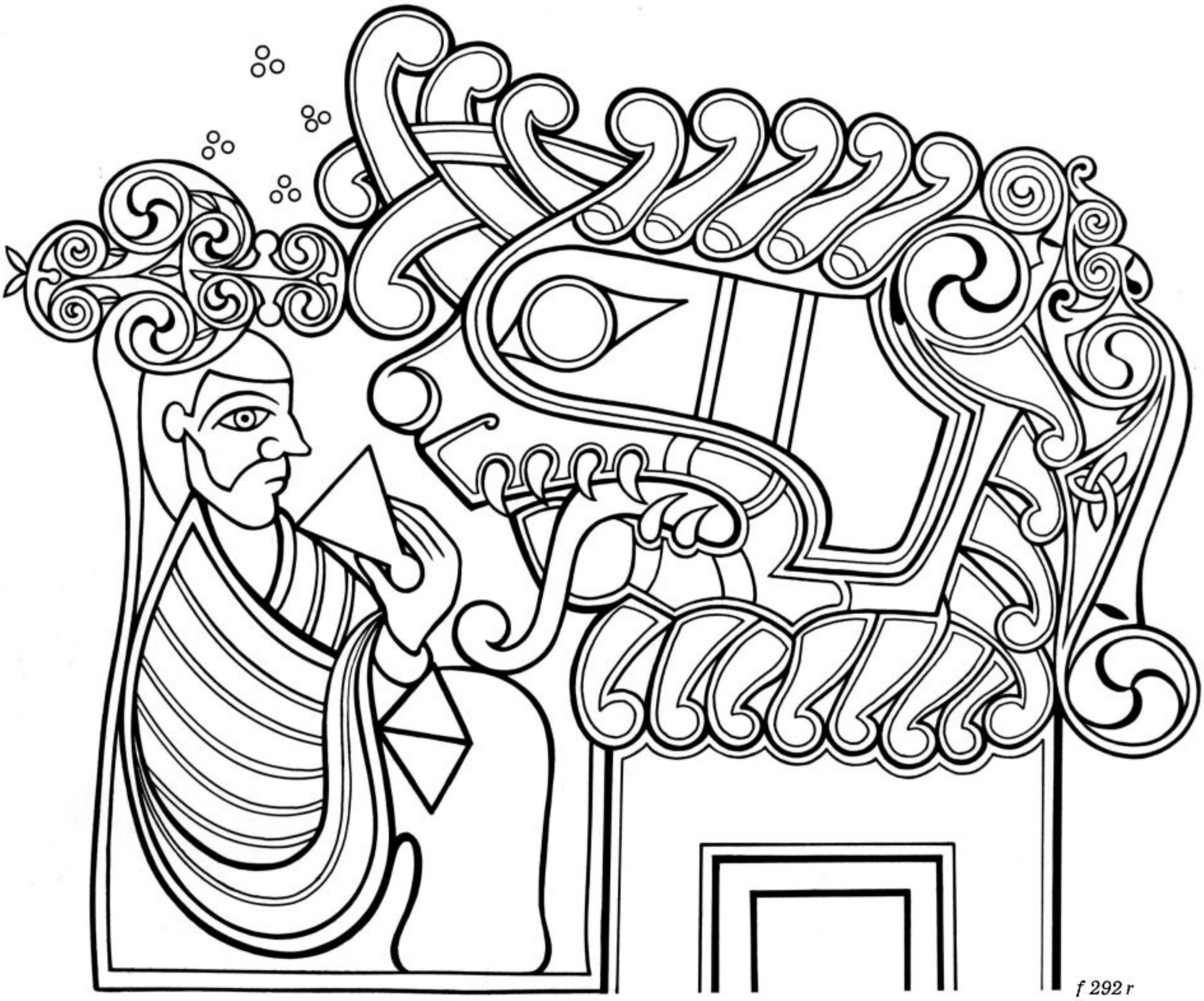
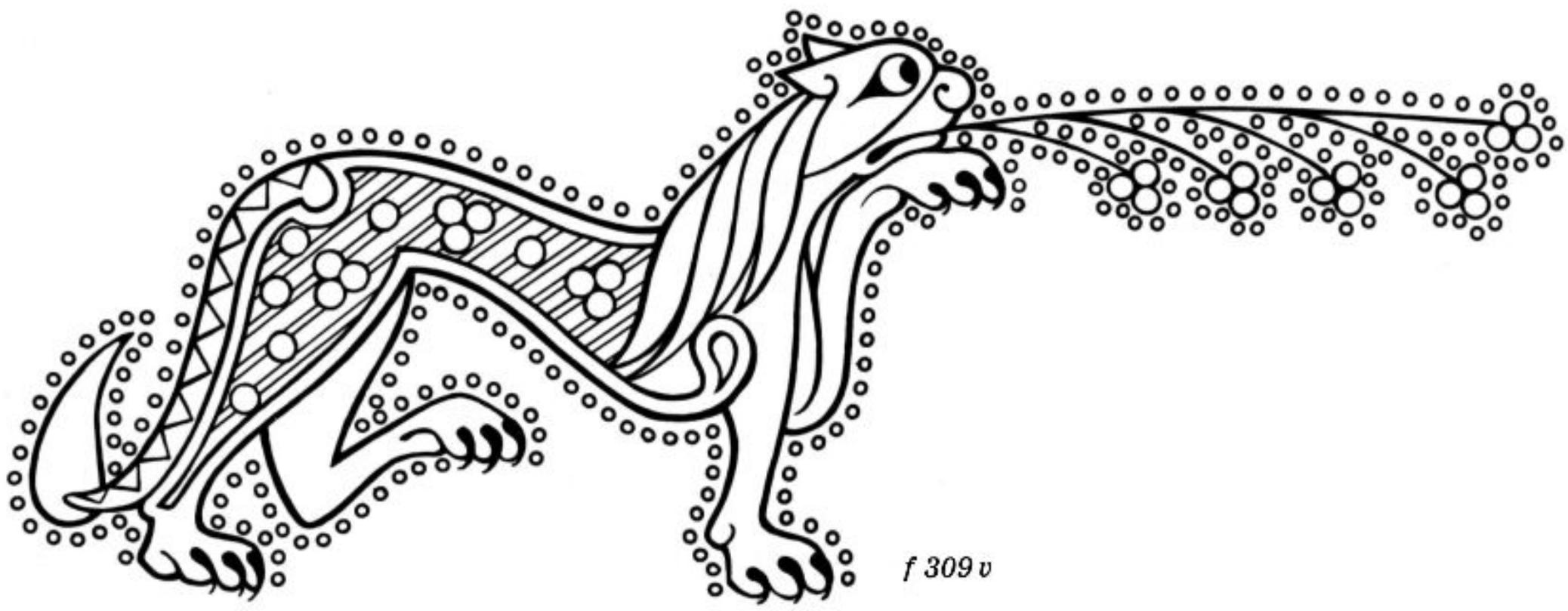


f 292 r

This tranquil monk seems unmoved by the danger of the lion looming just before him. In the same way, the monks at Iona were shocked when dragon-prowed ships full of Vikings suddenly appeared on their shores in 802 and shattered the peace of the monastery. The monks fled in terror—some were killed before they could escape, others moved to the monastery of Kells in Ireland, still others later returned to rebuild the community at Iona.



f 309 v

xLR8

f 285 r

The Viking raiders from Scandinavia did not stop at Iona. Later in the ninth and tenth centuries they attacked many monasteries in Ireland. They robbed church treasuries and broke their shrines, and threw precious manuscripts into the sea. The Book of Kells itself was stolen in 1007, perhaps by Vikings, and its golden cover was ripped off. The manuscript was buried by the thieves and was found again several months later under a sod.

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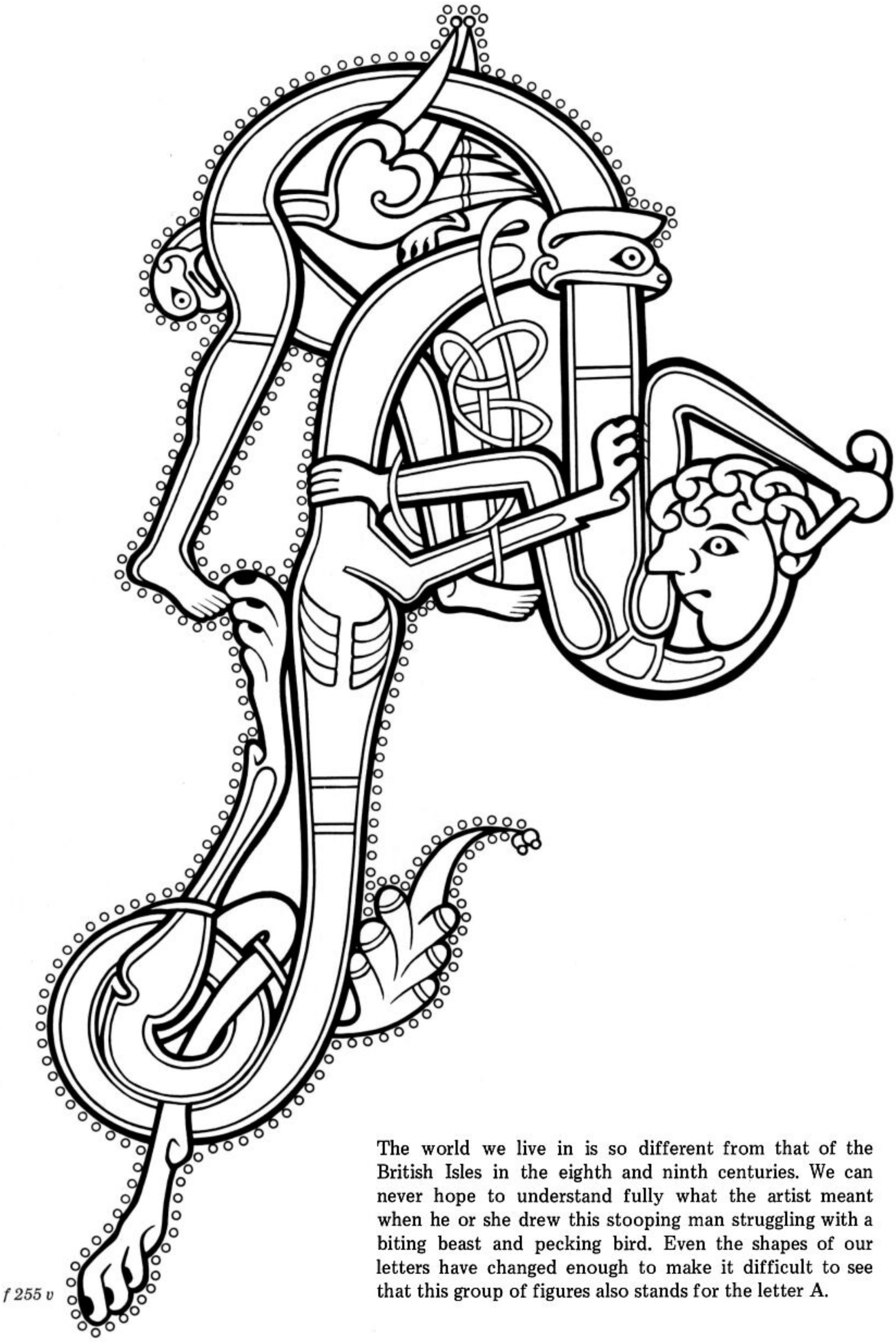
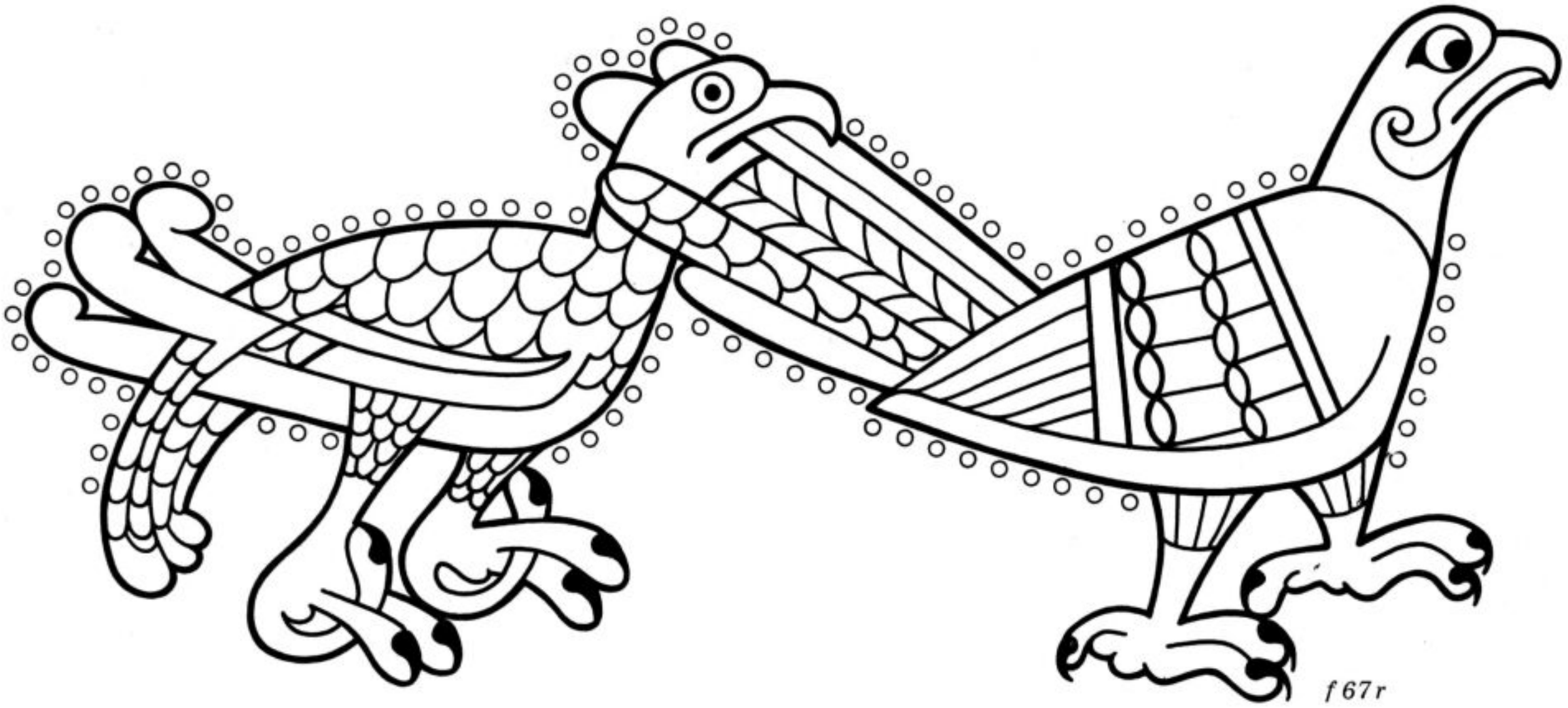


f 255 v

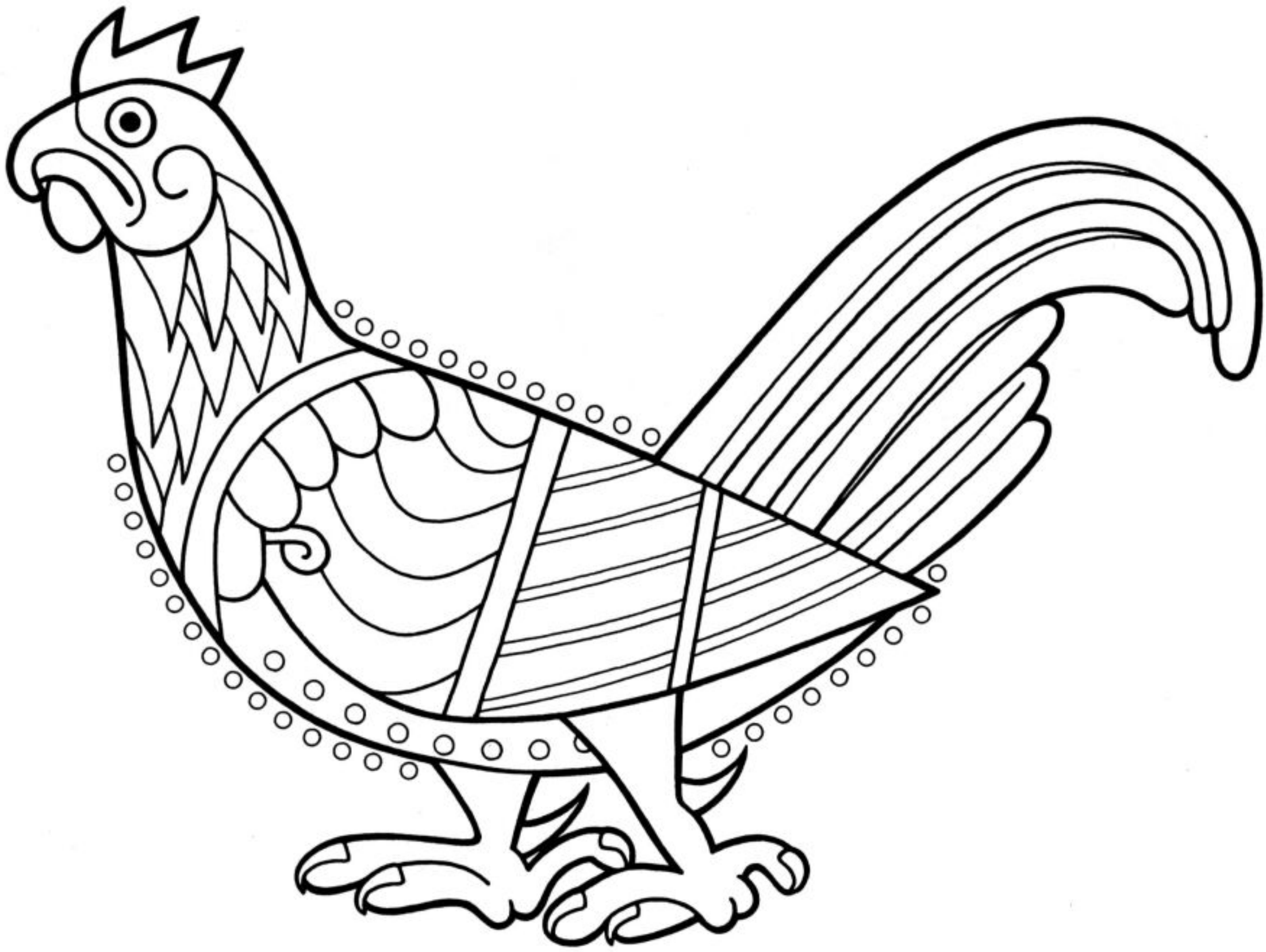
The world we live in is so different from that of the British Isles in the eighth and ninth centuries. We can never hope to understand fully what the artist meant when he or she drew this stooping man struggling with a biting beast and pecking bird. Even the shapes of our letters have changed enough to make it difficult to see that this group of figures also stands for the letter A.

xLR8



f 67 r

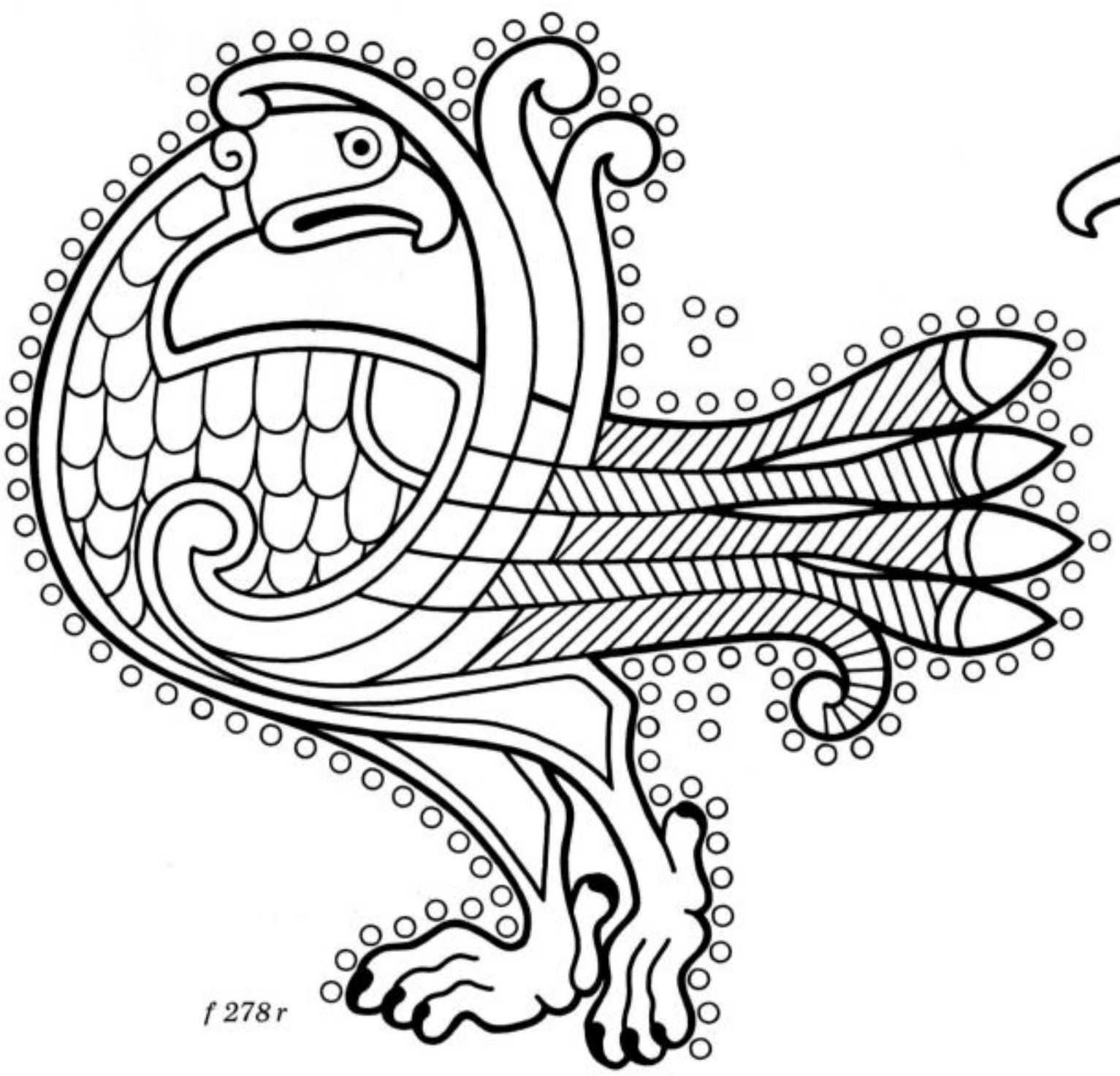
Other parts of the Book of Kells depict ordinary everyday life, and even show scenes which may still be seen today. These plain old chickens look almost like they just hopped off the farmyard and into the book, except that one has her claws crossed for good luck.



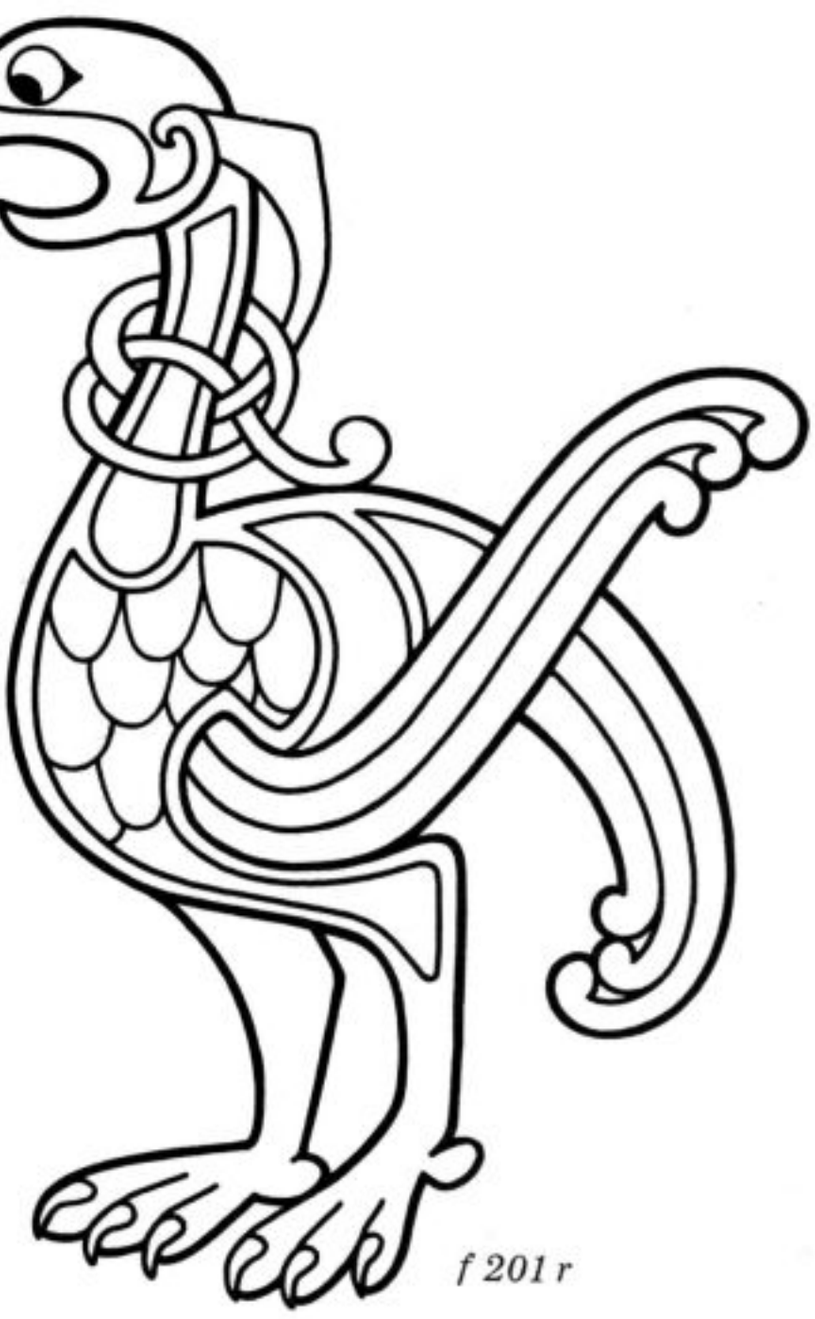
xLR8

f 255 v

This little monk rides his pony across the tops of a line of letters in the Gospel according to St. Luke, filling in the space at the end of the line above. Sometimes such figures inserted into the text of the Book of Kells are also marks of punctuation, helping to indicate the order of words in a sentence.



f 278 r



f 201 r

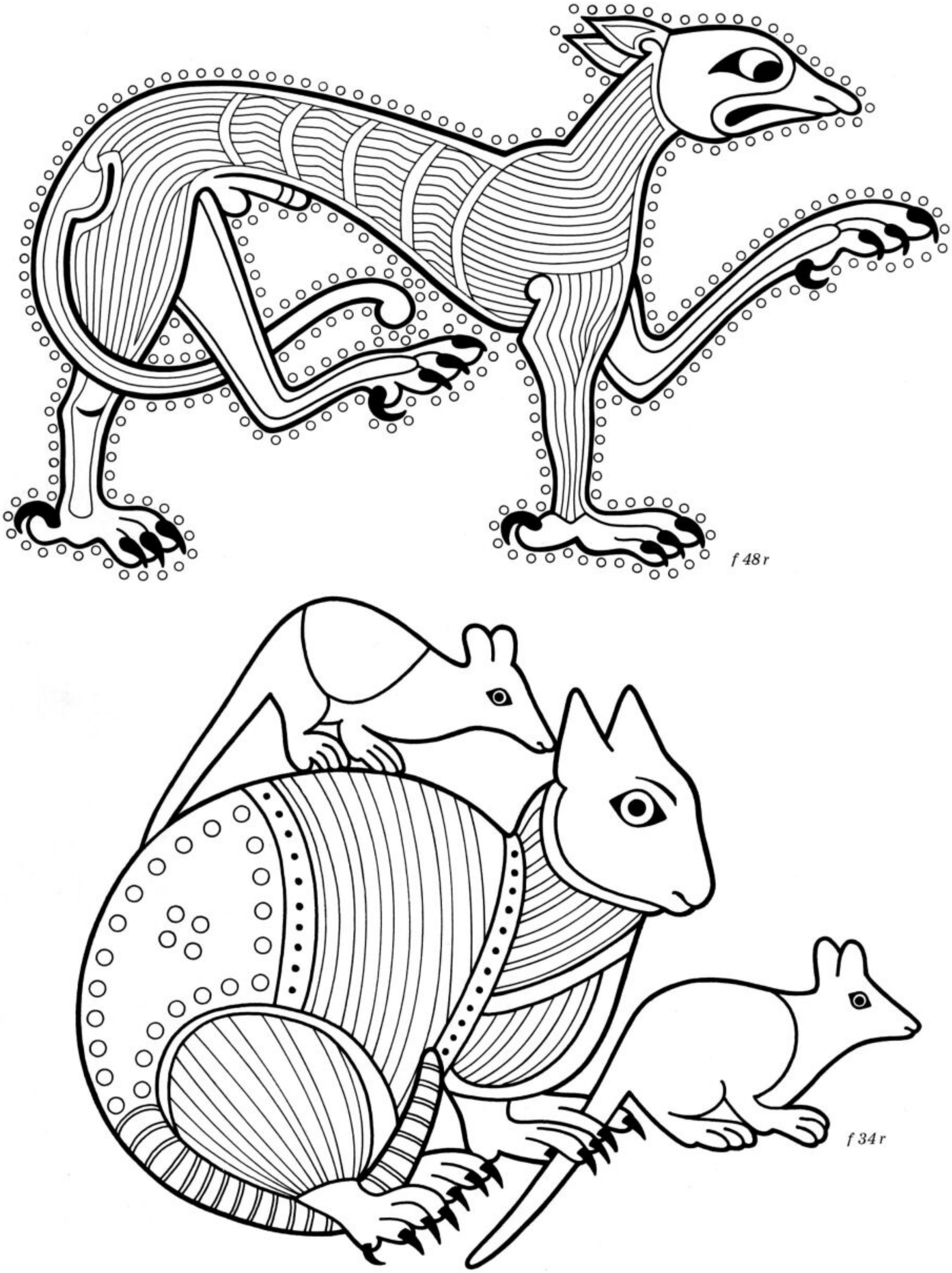
xLR8

f 277 r

→

The monks mixed their paints in a workshop for making manuscripts called a scriptorium. We don't know much about the tools and methods of work used in a scriptorium, but we can make some guesses. This scene of cats with rats is not too different from some cats on one of the sculptured high crosses of Ireland, at Monasterboice north of Dublin. Perhaps the motif was circulated around the neighborhood on a pattern sheet or sketch. Maybe there were collections of pattern sheets in the scriptoria (the plural of scriptorium) to be used as model books by the artists of the Gospel Books.

xLR8



f 48 r

f 34 r

The Gospel Books made in the scriptoria were shrines for the Word of God. They glorified the Word and the Word gave them power. The power of the Lord inhabited the books, and the books shared that power with their owners. Clerics, monks and saints of Ireland are always represented holding books, a badge of their office and holiness, and their protection against the brute animal force of the devil.

→

No matter what kind of crayons or paints or pencils you use to fill in this great letter U on the next page, with its dressing of birds, beast, and knots, your colors came ready-made and easy to use. The artist who drew the original U had to make his paint himself, grinding colored powders and mixing them with water, and adding a bit of raw egg-white to make the paint stick to the page. Part of the skill of being an artist a thousand years ago was knowing the recipes and technique for making good paint.

xLR8

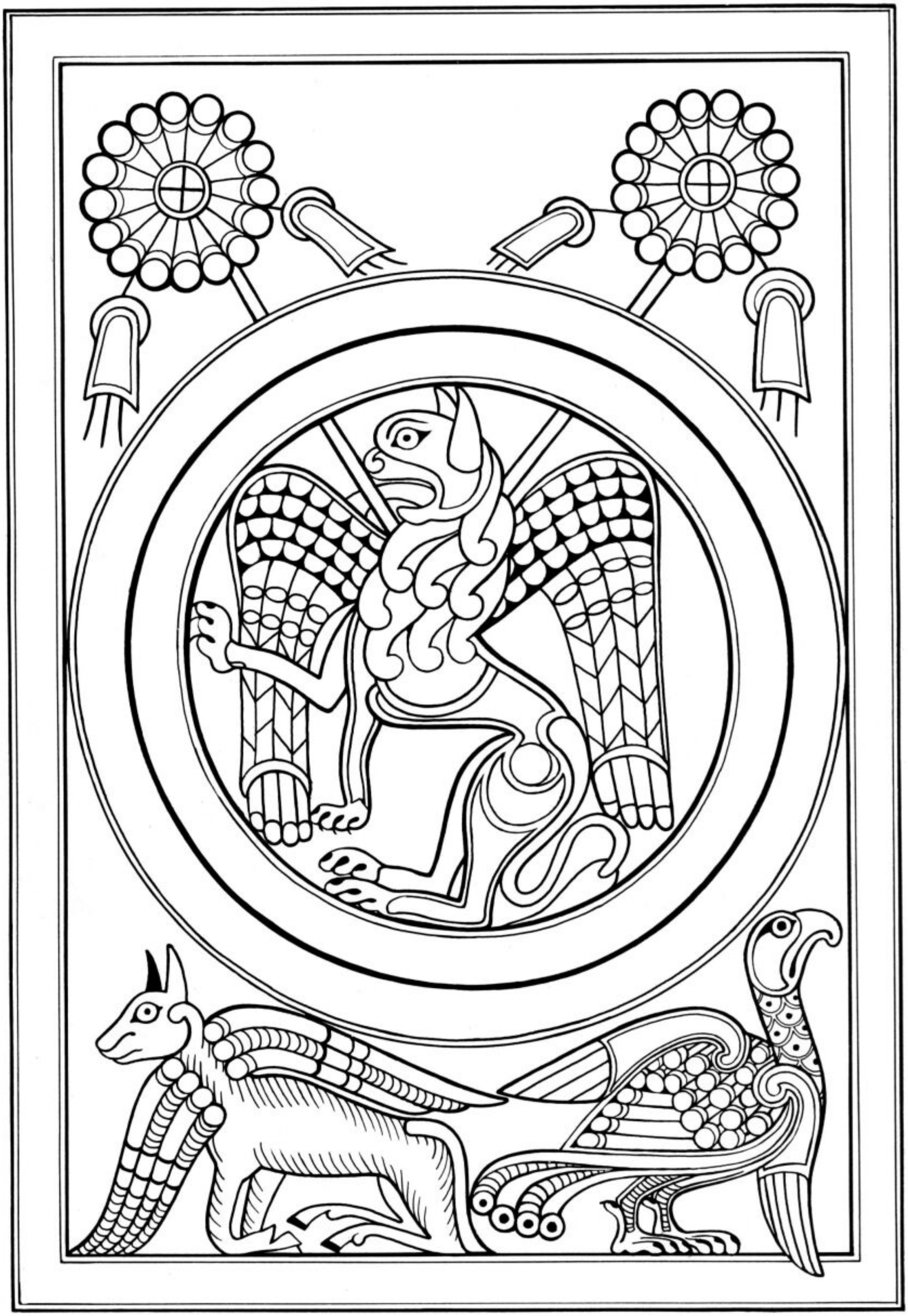
f 285 r

xLR8

f 183 r

The colored powders the artists ground and mixed came from many different things. Purple was made from the juice of a certain flower (called *Tournesol*). One shade of red came from the eggs of a kind of bug *(Kermococcus vermilio).* The blue used on this e in the Book of Kells was made from a gemstone called *Lapis Lazuli* which was brought by traders from Afghanistan, thousands of miles away from Ireland—it was as expensive as gold.

The same Gerald who wrote the quotation with which we began our tour of the Book of Kells also wrote this about the Gospel Book he saw in Ireland: "Here you may see the face of majesty, divinely drawn, here the mystic symbols of the Evangelists, each with wings ... here the eagle, there the calf, and there the lion, and other forms almost infinite."



f 129 v

xLR8

f 291 v

The portrait of the Evangelist John, here on this page, is a grand finale for the Book of Kells. He holds up a book in his left hand, a Gospel Book like the one he inhabits. In his other hand is a long curved quill pen, his tool as a writer. Above his right foot is a small cone, the inkhorn into which he will dip his pen. The giant halo around his head is full of more of the complicated patterns you have already seen on many other pages. The halo is so large that it seems to hold his head in place, and the whole figure is clamped into the frame, fitting into position as exactly as a monk should fit into the framing rules of his monastery. He and his monastic world are over a thousand years old.

xLR8

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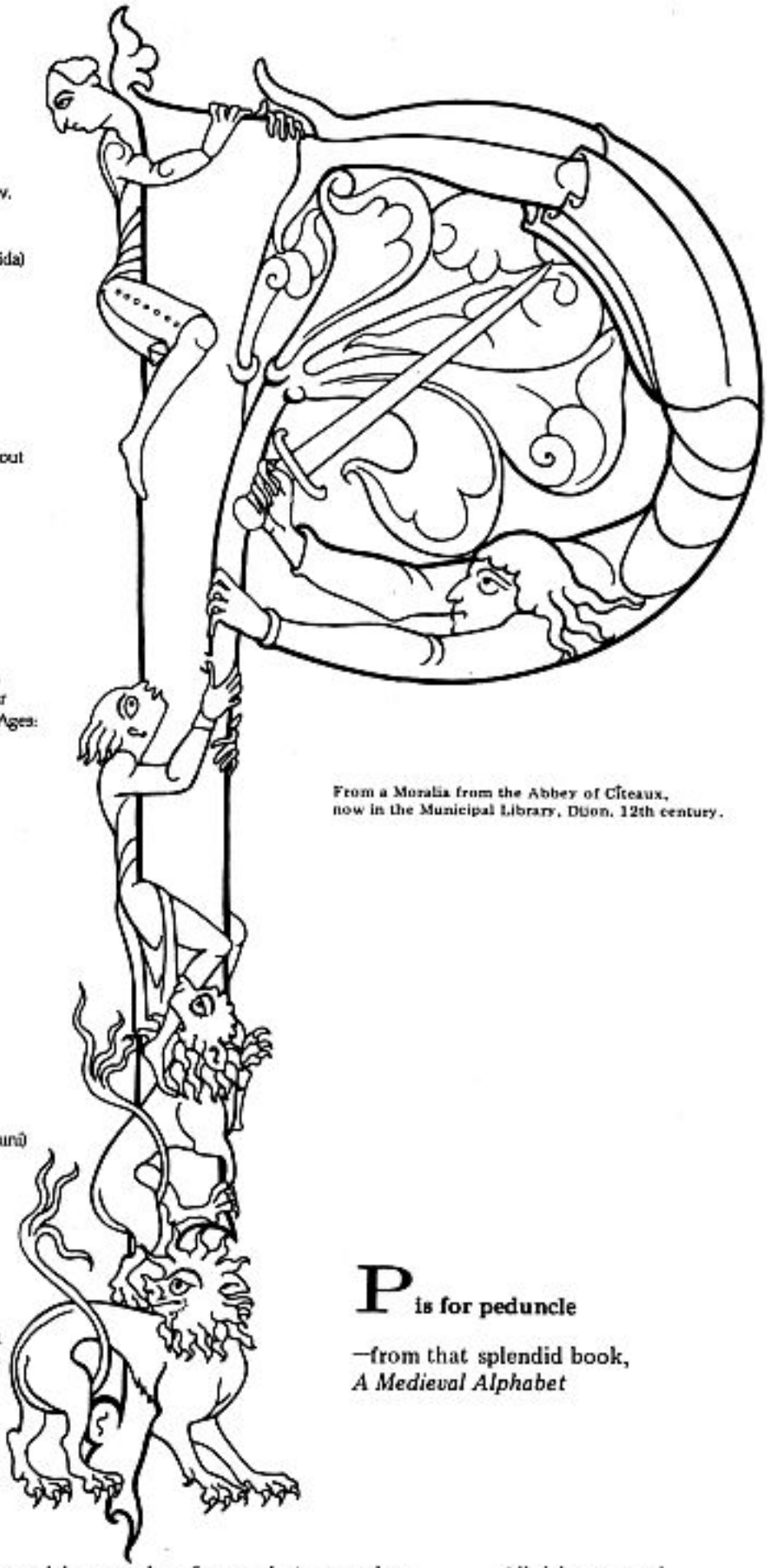

From a Moralia from the Abbey of Cîteaux, now in the Municipal Library, Dijon. 12th century.

P is for peduncle

—from that splendid book,
A Medieval Alphabet

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